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THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy & Science Fiction

FEBRUARY

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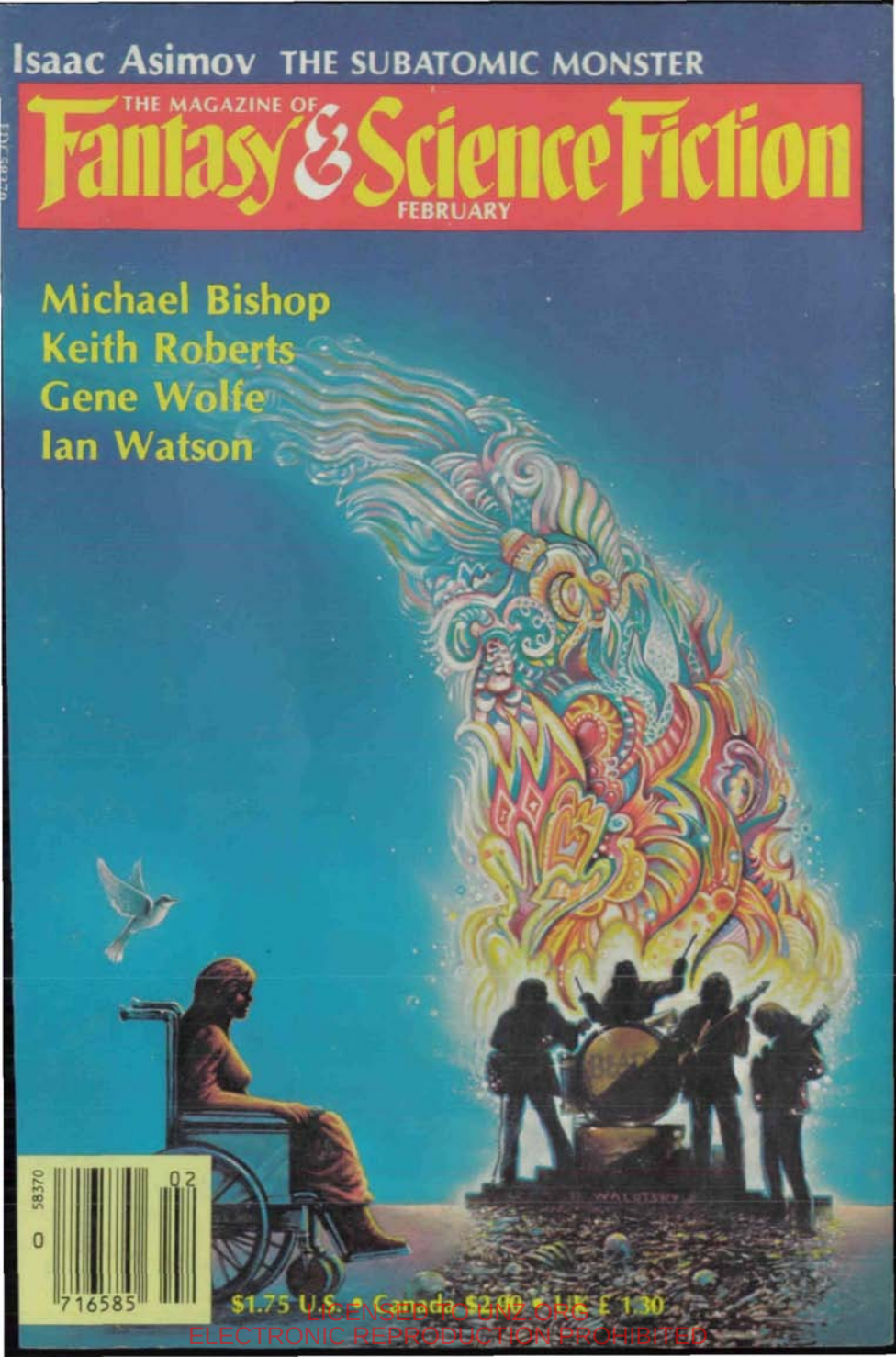

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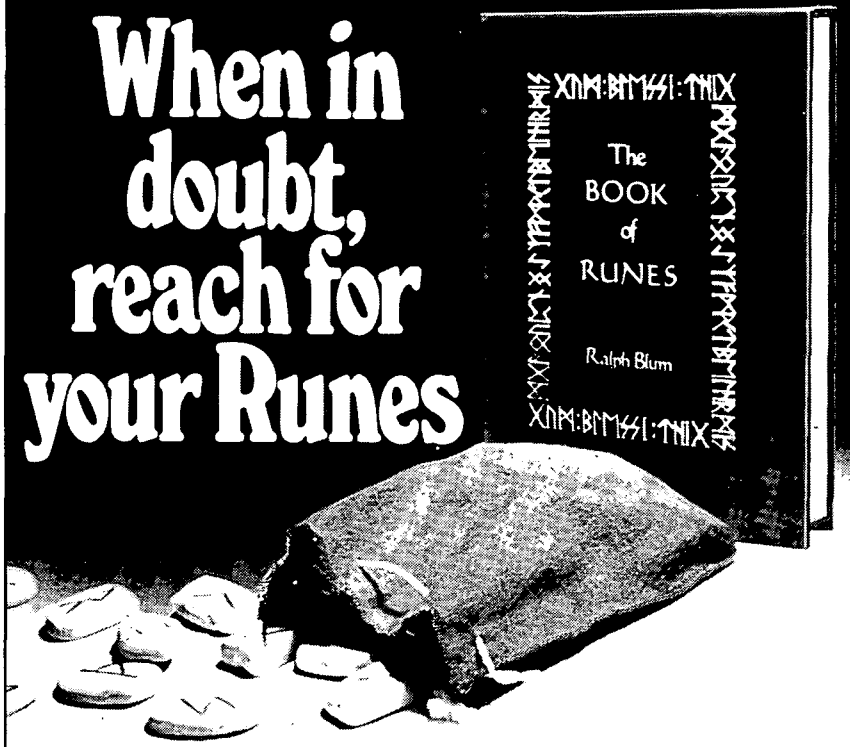

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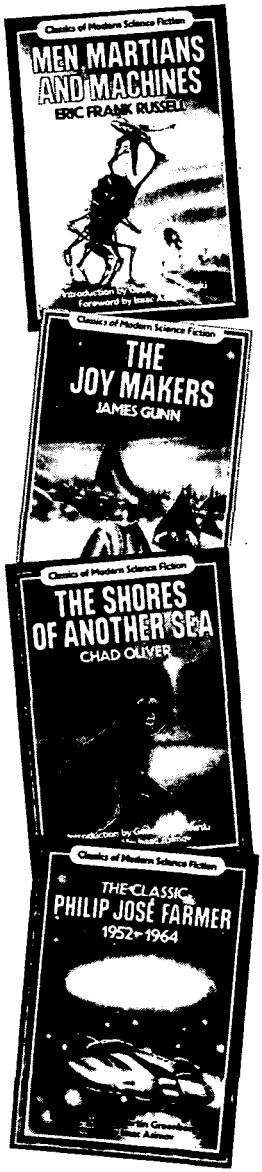

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Michael Bishop ("And the Marlin Spoke," October 1983) returns with a different and moving tale about a torture victim whose memories lead to a remarkable reunion...

With A Little Help From Her Friends

BY
MICHAEL BISHOP

Two years ago, Carlos knew, the woman's lips had been sewn together by the rightist vigilantes who had overrun and occupied her medical compound on the Pacific coast of the tiny South American country of Guacamayo. The government had regarded her humanitarian efforts among the Indians as a subtle but insidious brand of Marxism. Therefore, while sewing her lips together, the agents of the Guacamayan status quo had deliberately failed to use either antiseptics or anesthetics.

Today, on the pine-shaded lawn of the Amnesty International Torture Victim Rehabilitation Center in Warm Springs, Georgia (one of seven such sanitariums worldwide), Eleanor Riggins-Galvez sat in her wheelchair fielding the video correspondent's questions. Her voice was clear, but the aftermath of the vigilantes' barbarism revealed itself in the persistent twitching of her mouth and the involuntary fluttering of one dry eyelid. Carlos thought she had the look of an animate mummy. Nevertheless, her red-rimmed eyes still gleamed with a disturbing sparkle.

"They didn't want me cheering up the other hostages with talk and songs," she was saying. "That's why they did it."

"You sang?" Carlos Villar asked, surprised by this revelation. "What songs did you sing?"

"That's enough questions about her ordeal," interjected Dr. Karen Petitt, chief neurologist at the center. She was pushing the woman's wheelchair down the walk, and she indicated her disapproval of the correspondent's line of questioning by tilting its lightweight, blue-enamel frame away from Carlos.

"Why did you tell him that?" the

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wheelchair's passenger wondered aloud, glancing over her shoulder with one farcically screwed-up eye.

"I think you know why," the neurologist said.

"To keep from reminding me of the horrors I've been through," the torture victim intoned in a mocking singsong.

"I suppose that's an acceptable paraphrase of center policy."

"Karen, I'm reminded of those horrors every time I look into a mirror. Let Carlos put all the quéstions he wants."

"Do you want me to leave you alone with him?"

The correspondent's heart leaped. He worked for Video Verdadero, a satellite news service and broadcasting firm headquartered in Bogotá, and it had taken him nearly seven months to wangle this exclusive interview with *La Gran Dama de Misericordia*. He had succeeded (Carlos had no doubt) only because a maternal uncle living in Mexico City had funded so many of the *señora*'s quasi-saintly activities on the Guacamayan coast. By talking to him now she was doing little more than acknowledging her debt to another man, and so far this afternoon she had told him nothing that had not come out already, shortly after the spectacular liberation of Casa Piadosa. If Dr. Petitt left, maybe she would open up.

"Why not?" Eleanor Riggins-Galvez replied. "He can walk me down to the fish hatchery. If he asks me anything *too* painful, well, I'll feed him to that ugly spotted gar in the main pool."

And so, hands plunged deep in the pockets of her lab coat, Dr. Petitt sauntered resignedly back to the treatment center. A brown thrasher scurried out of her way, and the October sunlight sifting down on Warm Springs gave every item on the lawn — gazebo, birdbath, wrought-iron benches — a pastel fuzziness altogether alien to Bogotá. Only the nineteenth-century French Impressionists, Carlos felt, could truly do this light justice, but they were a school not much in favor here at the near beginning of the third troubled millennium since Christ's birth.

October 9, 2013.

Carlos began to ease the wheelchair down the long walk to the National Fish Hatchery. His passenger gripped her armrests as if she did not quite trust him. But, of course, torture victims always found it difficult to trust.

"What songs did you sing to cheer your co-workers and patients at Casa Piadosa after the government takeover?"

"First of all, Carlos, I didn't *sing* the songs."

"I don't understand."

"You would if you heard me sing. I have a voice like a stuck pig. I played the harmonica instead."

"Very good, *señora*. But what songs?"

"That's a second thing. Do you

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really believe Video Verdadero's audience is going to give a good damn about my repertoire?"

"Human interest. It's for the program *El Tiempo Turbulento*. When it comes to news of heroes, the vidsat audience is insatiable, and we've done to death every bit of trivia about the members of the United Nations antiterrorist force that rescued you and the others. Besides, who is to say what's trivial and what's of enormous ultimate consequence? *I*, for instance, would greatly like to know what you played. What was it that provoked those animals to take needle and thread to your lips?"

"Needle and fishing line. Top-grade Filimar fishing line. That's why I've got the mouth of an Amazonian shrunken head."

Carlos remained silent. Carefully then, he negotiated a turn and pushed his charge onto the apron of the main display at the hatchery. Here, hundreds of unfamiliar fish, including many diamond-backed carp as long as his own forearm, were dozing under lily pads or finning themselves from one shady spot to another.

A party of shirt-sleeved Japanese tourists (undoubtedly they had just visited the Little White House of Franklin Delano Roosevelt) milled about the display pond and the blond-brick aquarium next to it. Most of them evinced the same world-weary aloofness and torpor exhibited by the fish in the pale green water. Carlos did not feel comfortable around them and therefore maintained his silence. The *señora* smiled and nodded at the Japanese, however, and seemed genuinely saddened when they boarded an orange gyrobus in the parking lot and departed the hatchery.

"What songs?" Carlos inquired again.

"Mostly, I'm afraid, it was Beatles stuff."

"Beetles?"

"Not bugs, Carlos. A group of English-born musicians who disbanded more than forty years ago. The most controversial member was shot by a deranged fan outside his New York apartment building about ten years later."

"John Lennon?" said Carlos tentatively.

"You *do* remember, then?"

"Hardly, *señora*." The correspondent laughed. "I was born five or six months after this Lennon *hombre* fell dead on the pavement. I've read some things, heard a few tapes, seen some video. It's not really my interest, though. I like Ravel and Debussy."

"Good for you. Anyway, it was Beatles songs I found myself playing in the compound while El Presidente's thugs were holding us prisoner. 'Love Me Do,' 'I Feel Fine,' 'Eight Days a Week,' 'Yellow Submarine,' 'Here Comes the Sun.' Oh, a whole passel of such songs."

"Because they were cheerful?"

"Yes. And because they came back

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to me unbidden across all the years. I hadn't even *thought* about most of them since my college days. Too many other things to worry about. During the government's illegal siege of Casa Piadosa, though, they all came back — like doves alighting in the waiting branches of my memory."

"Like doves alighting," Carlos echoed her. "You should have been a poet, *señora*."

She laughed self-deprecatingly. "You're applauding doggerel, young man. Nevertheless, a facility with words is what I have in place of a singing voice. It's my God-given compensation."

"You have many compensations. You heal the sick—"

"Not anymore."

"Let me finish. You have deep feelings for the poor and dispossessed. You have friends in high places all over the world. Your name is a benediction to almost everyone who hears it spoken. You play the harmonica—"

"And I'm dying, Carlos."

"On the contrary, *señora*, you're making a remarkable recovery from a brutal ordeal."

"I'm getting well enough to die. El Presidente's stooges latch-hooked my lips together. Then, for the next eight days, they fed me on a tainted IV solution that introduced a slow-acting virus into my system. No antidote exists for this virus. El Presidente's despicable regime may have toppled because of his own recklessness and that unprecedented United Nations strike, but this is his revenge on me, Carlos. I call it *La Fiebre Furtiva*."

The correspondent squinted at the woman. "The Secret Fever."

"It's not contagious. No one at the Torture Rehabilitation Center has contracted it. Karen — Dr. Petitt — tells me that *La Fiebre Furtiva* is a figment of my imagination. A tenacious paranoid delusion growing out of my deep abhorrence of the tactics of our captors."

"Did they rape you?"

"Don't be naive. That goes without saying. And broke my legs four or five times each for good measure."

Carlos glanced at a huge mottled carp gliding through the waters of the pond. How removed it seemed from the conflicts and atrocities of the upper world.

"May I return tomorrow with my video equipment, *señora*? Dr. Petitt told me on the telephone that if I brought it today, she would not allow me to see you at all. So all I brought was this recorder." With a well-manicured fingernail he tapped the miniature device on his belt.

"Tomorrow, Carlos, bring your camera. I'll intercede with Karen. After all, what's a vidsat interview without pictures?"

"Radio," Carlos said, and they both laughed.

Whereupon the chimes of a local Protestant church began to reverberate through the pine-scented dusk. In obedience to their tolling, the young

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Colombian escorted Eleanor Riggins-Galvez back to the treatment center.

That night she could not get the correspondent's visit off her mind. No, that wasn't entirely accurate. Neither the image of Carlos Villar himself nor the vividness of his foray into her life had made her insomniac. Rather, it was that offhand bit of business about the Beatles. *That* had her helplessly casting back, combing through the detritus of her days to find the beginnings of her half-forgotten infatuation with those four Liverpudlian rock 'n' rollers. Her infatuation had long since turned into something else, of course: either a dogged subconscious refusal to admit to herself that she had ever enjoyed their music or a rare burst of nostalgia that spotlighted the teenage Eleanor Riggins in the dim but tolerant amusement of the person she had become. The Beatles. Lord have mercy, the Beatles.

In Guacamayo (it was true) the music of her young girlhood had come spilling out of her harmonica in spite of her adult self. Further, this music — these melodies — had almost certainly played a key role in stiffening her resolve in a situation of otherwise untenable terror. At first even El Presidente's thugs had been charmed by her breezy performances of the Lennon-McCartney material, but, finally realizing its part in boosting morale about the compound, they had retaliated by confiscating her harmonicas (she had five or six of them stashed among her belongings), and then by closing her mouth in as cruelly dramatic a fashion as they could devise without killing her.

Ah, but why Beatles music? Why not Christmas carols, Negro spirituals, Appalachian folk songs?

At Casa Piadosa she had never really considered the matter. She had merely let the music flow through her as if she and the harmonicas giving it voice were a single unthinking instrument for its peremptory expression. She was not so much playing the Beatles tunes as being played by them. That this music invariably heartened the other hostages and even a majority of their swaggering guards (payrolled rapists, torturers, and assassins) was a happy accident. At first, anyway. At first.

Now Eleanor sat in her wheelchair making a concerted effort to recall a bygone era....

JFK, Krushchev, John Glenn, Lee Harvey Oswald, and the British invasion of the American popular-music charts.

At first ... well, at first the Beatles had not interested her. When they appeared on a long-running CBS variety hour early in 1964, she was a socially backward, intellectually precocious thirteen-year-old whose most passionate longing was to become a medical missionary in Africa or South America. She watched *"The Ed Sullivan Show"* that Sunday night only

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because her older brother, Marshall, had to see the mop-topped quartet make their American television debut, and because even her parents could scarcely contain their curiosity about this unlikely show-business phenomenon.

During the program Eleanor made up her mind that these four British boys were silly-looking and their songs energetic but primitive pieces of nonsense. Although the elder Rigginses exchanged disbelieving glances and acidulous remarks about the musicians' haircuts and singing voices, they remained almost as attentive as Marshall and Eleanor to the band's performances. Afterward, more amused by her parents' behaviour than by the Beatles', Eleanor went to her room to do her homework. What was all the fuss about?

Two years later she was still relatively untouched by the fevers of Beatlemania. Of course, she could not turn on the radio without hearing one of the group's songs, nor could she go into a store without encountering some sort of makeshift shrine to their seemingly ubiquitous appeal (T-shirt displays, magazine covers. Beatle wigs, outsized posters), but her own private goals (divinity school, Johns Hopkins Medical College, a tour in the Peace Corps) kept her from stumbling into idolatry. She knew her own mind. Moreover, the uncompromising rigor of her goals isolated Eleanor so that she could pursue them.

Then, one Saturday morning, Susan Carmack — Eleanor's only close friend in the tenth grade — stopped by her house with a copy of the new *Revolver* album. In Eleanor's bedroom Susan put the vinyl disk on the turntable of a tacky portable stereo and insisted that she listen to a Lennon-McCartney composition titled "Eleanor Rigby." This proved to be a driving but melancholy song with a strangely haunting lyric.

"It could be about you," Susan said, "if your name was Rigby instead of Riggins."

"Thank goodness for that syllable's difference, then."

"Why?"

"Because it's a depressing song, Susan. Eleanor Rigby dies alone in her flat, and nobody comes to her funeral. That's why."

"Still," said Susan Carmack.

"Still what?"

"I'd be estatic if John and Paul wrote a song called 'Susan Carmody' or 'Susan Carlisle' or something. I wouldn't even mind if the girl in the song got knocked up and had to have an abortion and finally went to live in a Mexican whorehouse."

"I'll be you wouldn't."

Laughing and arguing, they listened to "Eleanor Rigby" two or three more times, then to the other songs on the album. Along with a whimsical photo montage, the record's cardboard sleeve featured Beardsleyesque pen-and-ink portraits of the four elfin

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fellows, and Eleanor found herself staring at these portraits with something like respect. Elfin or not, the Beatles seemed to have added the truly startling dimension of social consciousness to their work. Good for them. Thus inspired, in fact, she put down the jacket and hurried into her brother's bedroom to borrow the harmonica he kept hidden in one of his dresser drawers. With it, back in her own room, she played by ear impromptu off-key accompaniments to "Taxman," "Yellow Submarine," and many of the other songs. Susan Carmack, giggling, egged her on.

And so, like a sinner fussed over and prayed for by tenacious fundamentalists, Eleanor finally surrendered to the spirit animating her peers. At the advanced age of fifteen she, too, was a victim of Beatlemania....

Karen Petitt, silhouetted against the dull fluorescents of the corridor, was standing in the doorway.

"Mrs. Galvez, don't you want me to help you into bed?"

"Please."

"And just what are you doing up at this hour?"

"Remembering the first time I was tortured, Karen."

Maneuvering Eleanor's wheelchair closer to the narrow bed, the doctor said nothing. Her silence was not hard to interpret. She was undoubtedly wondering why her patient had chosen these lonely moments before bedtime to call up such unpleasant memories. Further, she was probably cursing herself for permitting Carlos Villar to come to the center to plague Eleanor with questions about the siege at Casa Piadosa.

"Karen, the first time I was relentlessly tortured was when I was fifteen. It had nothing to do with Guacamayo."

"Good," said the neurologist skeptically. She pulled the bed linen over her patient's body and then began to plump her pillow. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

"Why do you suppose I brought it up?"

"Go ahead," Dr. Petitt encouraged her. "I'll sit in your wheelchair while you talk."

"Oh, I'm going to sing a little, too — even if I do sound like a stuck pig. You see, off and on throughout my final three years of high school in Richmond, the boys in my classes would taunt me with a parody of the Beatles' 'Eleanor Rigby.' It went like this:

Eleanor Riggins
Scrapes at the lice
In her hair with her fingers and comb.
She's all alone.

Stoops by the teacher,
Browning her nose
In the crease of that fat lady's ass.
O what a gas.

Such a homely harpy,
She's not the smoochin' kind.
Such a homely harpy,
We love her for her mind.

* * *

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Eleanor's wavering, birdlike falsetto ceased. Turning her head, she saw that Dr. Petitt, as if in spite of herself, was smiling. She smiled, too, just to let the neurologist know that she had intended to provoke her amusement. Of course, the boys' relentless cutesy "torture" had not been especially funny at the time — not to her, anyway, although it had always played well to their sycophants and to new arrivals who had never heard it before. Eleanor had survived — had even managed to preserve a little of her dignity — by steadfastly ignoring these performances. But you could hardly hope to emerge unscathed from that kind of protracted belittlement, and she had not. Finally, in fact, even Susan Carmack had deserted her, and those last three years of high school had been a friendless hell.

"I don't have a ready treatment for that one," Karen Petitt admitted.

"Time," said Eleanor Riggins-Galvez, relishing the bromide. "Time heals all wounds."

Carlos, who was staying at the Peachtree Plaza Hotel in Atlanta, returned the following day with his video equipment, a cassette player, and a cassette of the Beatles' *Abbey Road* album that he had purchased at an all-night music bar not far from the hotel. The cassette had cost thirty-seven American dollars, and having listened to it back in his hotel room, Carlos felt grimly certain that the dealer had taped it from somebody else's imperfect copy of the authorized recording. Well, it would have to do. He meant it as a memento of his regard for *señora* Galvez, not really as something she would necessarily want to play over and over again.

Walking from the Warm Springs heliport to the Torture Victim Rehabilitation Center, Carlos passed many of the hospital's patients on the lawn. He had seen them yesterday, of course, but his involvement with Dr. Petitt and *señora* Galvez had prevented him from paying them much heed. Today their faces jumped out at him, masks in which only the eyes seemed to be living. Their bodies — whether propped in aluminum walkers, jammed in wheelchairs, or hobbling along with the aid of rubber-tipped canes — seemed to be encumbrances that the eyes in the masklike faces either despised or resented. And why not? Their bodies had betrayed them. The enemies of their deepest moral and political beliefs had sought to use their bodies to make them renounce or recant those beliefs. Even the strong-willed survivors who had withstood the agony inflicted upon them had not yet escaped the memory of their degredation. Most of these patients never would, not even the ones who walked upright and bore no outward sign of their ordeal. As a result, their own bodies were strangers to them, mangled suits of armor im-

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prisoning their souls.

Time, apparently, did not heal all wounds — unless, of course, you regarded death as an acceptable panacea.

Inside the hospital, Carlos filmed *señora* Galvez taking her afternoon meal with a man who had recently lost both hands to a cadre of Argentine guerrillas on the pampas. Beaming, this man fed *La Gran Dama* spoonful after spoonful of Brunswick stew with the living prostheses bioengineered for him by a Swiss company frequently engaged by the seven rehabilitation centers of Amnesty International. After this meal, Carlos recorded Eleanor trading good-humored insults with an orderly, wheeling herself down her long first-floor corridor, and playing a game of video chess with a patient undergoing therapy at a facility in Toronto.

Back in her own room, Carlos played the *Abbey Road* cassette for her. A young Peruvian torture victim wandered in and leaned against the doorjamb to listen. He wore only a pair of faded gray gym shorts and a suede vest on which he had pinned dozens of sloganeering buttons: "*Gente Arriba, Junta Abajo,*" "Don't Sell the Moon to General Motors," and so on. Carlos also noticed that purple welts ran up and down the insides of the empty-eyed victim's arms. Eleanor introduced him as Ramón Covarrubias, but the man merely nodded. He took his leave as soon as he finished listening to Side Two of *Abbey Road.*

The *señora* was a little more communicative; she thanked Carlos for his thoughtfulness.

"I have something else for you," he said.

"Indeed?"

Carlos produced a harmonica from his pocket and encouraged her to play along with "Here Comes the Sun," a song by Beatle George Harrison that she had often performed during the siege at Casa Piadosa. The old woman demurred, insisting that the damage done to her mouth and lips by El Presidente's henchmen had robbed her of the necessary strength and skill. She laid the instrument on an end table and stared out the window with a faraway frown so devoid of condemnation that Carlos, condemning himself, felt caddishly opportunistic. How could he make amends?

"At this stage in your life, *señora,* what would make you most happy?"

Immediately she responded, "You ask because I'm dying."

"I ask because you're recovering," Carlos said, parroting Dr. Petitt's own cheerful prognosis. "You have a future in store — twenty more years at the least. It's not your dying wish I want to know."

She looked through him. "What would make me most happy?"

"Yes, *señora.*"

"Do you want a hypothetical response, something grandiose and farfetched like World Peace or An End to Poverty? Or would you prefer some-

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thing within the pale of possibility, something that would actually increase my small stores of happiness?"

"The latter, of course." But Carlos found these finicky qualifications baffling and wondered if he had answered correctly.

"Are you going to try to grant my wish if I reveal it?"

"Well, Video Verdadero might. If it's grantable."

"Queen for a Day," said Eleanor Riggins-Galvez abstractedly. Then: "World Peace, Carlos. An End to Poverty. Those are the things that would make me most happy. I wish Video Verdadero great success in bringing them about."

Caressing his video gun, Carlos sat down on the window seat near the old woman's wheelchair. She had withdrawn into herself, and he felt a great need to reestablish contact. "In Atlanta last night, *señora*, I did some checking through my Infoplex terminal. Three of the members of this group — I'm speaking of the Beatles — well, three of them are still alive. One lives in England, one divides his time between Scotland and the West Coast of the United States, and one has a domed villa in The Sea of Rains on Luna. The low gravity eases a peculiar medical condition that has been troubling him for seven or eight years."

Señora Galvez laughed, a birdlike titter. Then, less than enchantingly, she sang three or four lines of "Fly Me to the Moon."

"What would you say if these former members of the Beatles got back together to commemorate your recovery?" Carlos pursued.

"They must be in their seventies. They're older than I am."

"Would it make you happy, *señora* — such a stellar reunion?"

"Not if it discomfited *them*, Carlos. Let the rich old farts live out the remainder of their days in peace. Me, too, for that matter."

"Video Verdadero may be able to arrange it."

"Why bother? There've been partial reunions before, Carlos, and John Lennon's dead. You know that. Besides, nobody cares anymore."

"It wouldn't gladden your heart to see these three old men playing and singing together again?"

"I don't know. Maybe. If it didn't convulse me with laughter."

"Ah," said Carlos Villar. He played the *Abbey Road* cassette again. This time Ramón Covarrubias, still in his gym shorts, returned to the room with a party of more conventionally clad torture victims from the same wing. Eleven well-mannered auditors in all, ranging in age from a pale young woman in her early twenties to a balding Oriental-looking gentleman not much younger than *señora* Galvez. This last patient, Carlos was surprised to note, had tears in his eyes.

With his hostess's permission, then, the correspondent used his video gun to record the entire poignantly surreal

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scene. It gave him almost exactly what he wanted for the segment of *El Tiempo Turbulento* to be devoted to the Saint of Casa Piadosa.

This segment ran on the Video Verdadero network on the last Thursday in October. The staff and patients at the Warm Springs Torture Victim Rehabilitation Center convened in the cafetorium and entertainment hall to watch it on the enormous wall screen there. The onlookers wore earplugs that provided simultaneous translation of the Spanish commentary for any who required it, and much laughter and applause greeted *La Gran Dama*'s sallies at either the previous Guacamayan government's or her earnest young interviewer's expense. In fact, the laughter and applause frequently overrode the segment's embarrassingly upbeat narration. A good thing, too. The subject of the piece was beginning to choke on Carlos's unadulterated praise.

At the conclusion of the program, when the hall had pretty much emptied, Karen Petitt came to Eleanor and handed her a printout of a standby front page for the following morning's *Atlanta Constitution*. The lead story was labeled "special to the *Constitution*," and its author was Carlos Villar. Dr. Petitt conjectured that the wire services would pick up the story and distribute it to the electronic and print media nationwide. This likelihood appalled Eleanor because, in a fashion that made even fulsome praise seem a blessing, the story's headline sabotaged her dignity:

SAINT OF GUACAMAYO'S DYING WISH:
THAT LIVERPUDLIAN ROCK'N'ROLLERS
REUNITE FOR WARM SPRINGS
TORTURE-REHAB CONCERT

"Oh, no," said Eleanor.

"Oh, yes," said Karen Petitt. "It's a lot of garbage about Beatlemania and *La Fiebre Furtiva*."

"Oh, no, Karen."

"He had the good sense — the decency — to leave both those topics out of the video broadcast, but he's playing them up in the print media in the hope of bringing about an even bigger coup for Video Verdadero."

"A show in my honor here at the center?"

"Exactly. He refrained from using *El Tiempo Turbulento* to make such an appeal only to preserve his employer's credibility — to save face — if the appeal fails. His own credibility, too, so far as that goes. He's really an unscrupulous schemer, Mrs. Galvez."

Eleanor laughed. "Handsome, though. And sincerely solicitous in person. I've got a kind of radar for such things."

"Do you really want him to show up here again with two or three doddering ex-Beatles in tow?"

"I'd be happier," said *La Gran Dama* after pondering a moment, "if he showed up with Adolfo, my Adolfo, instead — but I certainly wouldn't turn away *Messieurs* McCartney, Har-

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rison, and Starr. I just regret not having mentioned the chance to see Adolfo again when young Villar asked me what would make me *most* happy. At the time, though, that seemed as farfetched a wish as World Peace, and certainly a more selfish one."

Adolfo Galvez, an Argentine by birth but today the director of a classical theater group in Maracaibo, was Eleanor's estranged husband. They had been separated for twelve years, a schism dating back to the third year of her mission in Guacamayo; and if any person in the world today (the long-suffering Karen Petitt aside) had received dramatic proofs of Elenaor's unworthiness for canonization, it was Adolfo Galvez. To further her work, she had married this taciturn, independently wealthy man as a matter of convenience, believing that Adolfo fully understood and acquiesced in the nature of their partnership. He was to sponsor her activity in the field; she was to boost his reputation in theatrical circles by reflecting on his surname the glory of her high-profile humanitarianism.

Instead, Adolfo had come to live with her at Casa Piadosa, a declaration of commitment that he abandoned only when it became clear to him that his wife was never going to retire from the compassion business into orthodox domesticity. In the meantime, though, she had given him to realize how unsuited he was to such simple menial tasks as taking a temperature, dressing a superficial machete wound, or comforting a frightened child. More often than not, he had been in the way — a clumsy, well-intentioned man whose demonstrated aptitude for management she had chosen to ignore, invariably giving him just those tasks that confounded or humiliated him. After all, Casa Piadosa was *hers*. More saintlike than she, Adolfo had hung on for two years before confessing his unhappiness and retreating to the bright lights of Buenos Aires, Caracas, and finally Maracaibo. Then, in order to increase his contributions to Venezuelan artistic causes, over a five-year period he had gradually but deliberately phased out his financial support of the Guacamayan mission.

"Adolfo came to see you soon after your admittance," Karen Petitt reminded Eleanor. "You ran him off."

"I regret that, too. I didn't like the way I looked. And I didn't want to face anyone I'd treated as badly as I had Adolfo."

"But you're ready for the Beatles?"

"If our friend Carlos can arrange it, bring them on. I've never done anything to hurt *those* chaps." And to hell with my "dignity," she thought. Maybe I'm finally old enough to dispense with it.

Two days later, in Bogotá, Carlos was surprised to receive a televideo communication from the chief neurologist at the Warm Springs center. The

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woman did not like him, and as soon as her face materialized on the console screen in his office, he braced himself for a torrent of invective and recrimination. After all, he had trespassed on her grudging hospitality by releasing to the American press word of *señora* Galvez's fatal illness — an illness, moreover, in which neither Dr. Petitt nor he truly believed. Also, there was Carlos's altogether outrageous call for a reunion of superannuated rock 'n' rollers at the treatment center itself.

"My superiors at Amnesty International, London, have given their O.K.," the woman said, obviously trying very hard to be pleasant. "You may arrange the concert, and if the event should actually occur, you have our permission to provide video coverage. Other details, of course, you'll have to work out with the principals themselves. They may not wish to grant your organization exclusive rights to their performance."

Dumbfounded, Carlos gaped at the neurologist's image. At last he said, "*Muchísimas gracias*, Dr. Petitt. How have I won your unexpected cooperation?"

"Wars and rumors of war abound, *señor* Villar. Political hit teams kill three or four people every day. Territorial disputes make enemies of former allies. Terrorist activity has increased every decade since the 1960s, and, after electronic surveillance, torture has become the most widely used instrument of oppression in the world. The Asian nuclear 'demonstrations' of '93 and '02 have claimed more victims than anyone but bleeding-heart alarmists ever supposed possible, many of them among the perpetrators themselves, and recent numbing real estate negotiations between multinational corporations have even put the moon at risk. In comparison, your own petty opportunism pales."

"Thank you," said Carlos wryly.

"What I'm trying to say is that against such a climate of perpetual crisis, my superiors think your self-serving scheme may be good for morale everywhere — especially among the patients here at the center. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Doctor. But what of *señora* Galvez?"

"I have some things to tell you about her, too. Please keep my confidences in mind while you're planning this event."

"Of course, Doctor. Of course."

Karen Petitt talked for ten more minutes. Although his vidcom unit was automatically recording their conversation, Carlos took notes in longhand. This activity, by focusing his attention, always steadied his nerves. Then, when the neurologist had signed off, he set to work pulling strings, calling in IOUs, renewing potentially useful contacts, and, in general, pretending to be an entrepreneur of staggering clout and competence. Over the next several days he was astonished to find how many people were willing — even

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eager — to believe in his masquerade.

At the Torture Victim Rehabilitation Center, reporters from dozens of American and European print publications and video magazines tried to call on Eleanor, but Dr. Petitt and the uniformed security personnel held them at bay. One afternoon, in fact, while taking the sun on one side of the hexagonal walkway surrounding the gazebo, Eleanor heard a man with a bullhorn (or maybe it was a battery-powered handmike and amplifier) cry out, "Mrs. Galvez, Mrs. Galvez, are you really dying? Do you have any last words for the millions of people who admire you?" However, this anonymous voice from beyond the fence palings succumbed to a security-force charge led by three or four leash-tugging German shepherds, and she had no chance to reply.

Then the weather turned cold, Eleanor could no longer sit on the lawn, and the world press corps, for all it impinged on the predictable day-to-day routine of her life, went into something very like hibernation.

Carlos Villar was a rather remote memory. Eleanor was certainly not thinking of him when she set about putting her affairs in order so that when *La Fiebre Furtiva* claimed her, no one at the hospital would have any doubt about what to do with either her body or her belongings. Cremate the former. Sell the later and divide the money between the World Health Organization and Amnesty International. She had absolutely nothing else to divest.

In the second week of November, then, she was contemplating the harmonica that Carlos had left with her, thinking that maybe she should give the instrument to Ramón Covarrubias, when an orderly ushered into her room a portly septuagenarian with sad eyes, a heavy mouth, pendulous dewlaps, and a crown of white hair cut in the Roundhead style of Lord Cromwell's seventeenth-century followers. This elegantly dressed man walked with a noticeable limp, almost dragging himself across the room to shake her hand.

"Richard Starkey, mum. Pleased to meetcha."

"Starkey?"

He showed her the ornate ruby ring on his little finger. "Me nom de nativity, I'm afraid. It's an incognitoism I've taken to using here on Mother Earth. As if it much mattered anymore."

"You're the one from The Sea of Rains," Eleanor said. "The drummer."

"Only I'm not selling anything, mum. Meself, p'raps. I've come to see yer because me agent said I should." With some obvious pain he eased himself down on the window seat next to her wheelchair. "If I may. —It's been an age since I banged the skiffle cans. Or acted, for that matter."

"You live on Luna for your health, don't you?"

"Right," the mournful little man said, "It's more exciting than Flagstaff,

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though. Closer to heaven, too."

Eleanor cast about for a response. "How do you like Georgia this time of year?"

"Arfully warm, ain't it? Actually, though, it's not the heat, mum, it's the gravity. The bare-O-metric pressure, too. I'll adjust well enough inna nother coupla weeks. Me doctors say I'm a Methuselah-in-the-Making."

"I'm so glad," Eleanor replied, meaning it.

Whereupon their conversation, to this point little more than an exchange of awkward, half-flippant pleasantries, ran up against a brick wall. So this was one of the surviving former Beatles. Just to look at, he could have been a greengrocer (a prosperous one) or a vice president of a robotics firm. Nice enough, of course, but what did the two of them really have to say to each other? Her enthusiasm for the Chaplinesque figure he had cut in his youth had always taken a back seat to her late-blooming enthusiasm for the Lennon-McCartney team; even the aesthetic-looking George Harrison, the group's single-minded proponent of sitar and tabla, had initially seemed to her a more likely candidate for idolization. And then, of course, she had set aside such childish concerns by tackling the demanding disciplines of theology and medicine. The Beatles had disbanded about the time she was truly coming into her own. Now, it seemed, she and this wrinkled simulacrum of one-quarter of a former legend were struggling to establish for each other their credentials as human beings. And only narrowly succeeding.

"You said your agent told you to come?"

"Right. To see if you'd really like me and the other fellows to put on a show here. Most of the video loot we'll shove along to the rehab centers, keeping back a small moiety for ourselves to cover expenses and feed the corporate hangers-on. Whaddaya say, mum? Would you like us to do yer a Christmas gig?"

"Of course I'd like it, Mr. Starkey."

"Call me Ringo. Or Ishmael, if you'd rather." He pointed his not inconsiderable nose at the harmonica in her hands. "You play that, doncher?"

"Once upon a time. No more."

"John was our harmonica player. Remember 'Love Me Do'? We did fifteen cuts o' that one before George Martin was satisfied with the instrumental track. John's mouth went numb running back 'n' forth on the grill. Fookin' hard work, that. If you'll pardon the expression."

"I'll second it if you like."

The man laughed, brushed off the thighs of his trousers, and stood up. "Well, I'm off to Californication Land, then. When I come back, we'll do for you and yer friends here just like the Beatles of yore. That's a promise."

"Your harmonica player's dead," Eleanor heard herself say. The words were out before she could stop them.

"And the rest of us've gone plump

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— well, maybe not George — and grizzly-gray. You'll just have to fill in for John, Mrs. Galvez. That's all there is to it." He saluted her and limped out of the room without another word.

November passed on. Seasonal decorations — flocked trees, Santa Claus cutouts, even elaborate Yuletide mobiles revolving lopsidedly in the drafty corridors — popped up around the center as if by magic. Eleanor drew Ramón Covarrubias's name for the annual Christmas gift-exchange, but she could not bring herself to give up the harmonica. What Ramón really needed, she told herself, was a brand-new pair of cotton Winterskins.

In a high-tech conference room in Southern California, a luxurious sanctum in which hanging green plants and the amplified white noise of the surf did little to soothe his nerves, Carlos Villar listened to the "principals" debate the merits of a private performance for the Warm Springs torture victims, foremost among them Eleanor Riggins-Galvez. Over and over Carlos assured the three men — only two of whom were actually in the room, Harrison having chosen to audit the proceedings via a television hookup in London — that the videocast of their miniconcert would go out to the world at large only after they themselves had edited the tapes and settled upon a mutually acceptable final version.

"This is exactly what John didn't want to happen," protested McCartney, big-eyed, ghostly, and somewhat bloated-looking in the fuzzy beige sweater he was wearing. "Didn't he swear we'd be four rusty old men playing out somebody else's fancy? It'd be even worse now, wouldn't you say?"

"That's why we get to edit the bugger," replied the ex-Beatle from Luna. Carlos had worked long and hard to persuade Starr to make the three-day crossing, first to sound out *señora* Galvez and then attend this meeting as his most powerful ally among the musicians themselves.

"We're pretty bleeding likely to stink," countered McCartney. "Is Video Verdadero going to be happy with a two-minute program?"

"The old lady wants us," said the dogged drummer. "She's a saint, and she's dying."

"Do you want to give her tarnished goods, then? The notion's crackers, my dear Ringo-Dingo. John would—"

"Are you really invoking John again?"

"John would undoubtedly puke is all I was going to say."

Said Harrison's image from the vidcom unit at the end of the table: "Seems to me, John's past worrying about it."

"*Gracias*," Carlos murmured under his breath.

Of the three surviving members of the group, Harrison was the only one who remained svelte, almost hungry-

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looking. His close-cropped white hair accentuated his leanness. It was not difficult to imagine him — even at his present age — wielding an electric guitar as if it were a fierce, crooning animal whose neck must be wrung to propitiate the gods of rock 'n' roll and all their frenzied worshipers.

"It doesn't matter anymore," said Starr. "To three-quarters o' the folks alive today we're about as timely as the bloomin' cavemen."

McCartney turned on his heel. "I dunno about *that*."

"Speak for yerself," said Harrison from the vidcom unit. "Timely is as timely does."

"I always speak for meself, I do, and I say we're old enough to make fools of ourselves. We've *earned* the fookin' privilege, 'ticularly if we befool ourselves in a good cause, and this one's got the markings."

"Three Lads Who Rooked the World," said Harrison from the screen.

Even McCartney laughed, and Carlos hurried to interject, "This reunion will be much more legitimate — honest, I mean to say — than that film you made in the early nineties, that silly Agatha Christie thing. You all had cameo roles but not a single scene together." Although the deal seemed just on the verge of clicking, Carlos felt compelled to keep up the pressure, to trot out whatever bits of historical trivia would spark their surrender and subsequent cooperation. He had done his homework, and he wanted to prove to them that he had.

"Why don't you take a short hike?" Starr said. "I *liked* that silly Agatha Christie thing, and you're queering me pitch."

Flustered, red-faced, Carlos let himself into the carpeted antechamber where three corporate attorneys, a pair of high-powered personal agents, and an executive of Video Verdadero's American affiliate were amusing one another with gossip and the kind of self-effacing braggadocio that passed among them for wit. They shot looks of anxious inquiry at Carlos. He shrugged, walked across the room, and sat down in a lounger equipped with headphones and a video hood. Twenty minutes later he felt a hand on his ankle.

"It's set, mate," said the Beatle from Luna. "Don't hold your breath till it comes off, now, but I do believe it's set."

Eleanor had a front-row seat in the cafetorium and entertainment hall. Karen Petitt occupied the chair immediately to her left, and the remaining patients and staff — a number that had swelled by thirty or more, owing to the influx of the community and state officials claiming various doubtful kinds of affiliation with the center — filled nearly every inch of space behind the two women. Where no people sat or stood, up sprouted a piece of remote-controlled video equipment or a battery of triangulating theatrical

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lasers. Nestled at strategic points about the hall were dozens of miniature speakers to provide the group the occasional orchestral accompaniment it could not generate for itself. Montage projectors in the rear of the hall recreated the myth of Swinging London and the legend of the Fab Four on a scrim of translucent indigo hanging down behind the performers themselves. These image projections slowed for love songs, ricocheted back into action for hard-driving rockers.

How small they seem, Eleanor thought. How gloriously ancient.

Indeed, in their white tuxedoes the four of them looked very much like well-dressed refugees from a Busby Berkeley musical. At present, suitably enough, McCartney's husky voice was doing quite a respectable job on the lyric of "Yesterday." Meanwhile, somewhat apart from the others and even more ethereal in his imaginary old age than were his living comrades, Lennon fingered his guitar strings pensively.

Something bumped Eleanor's right elbow, and she glanced that way to see Carlos Villar easing himself into the only vacant chair remaining in the hall. *"Perdóname, señora,"* he whispered. "I had some last-minute business to attend to."

"The Lennon's really remarkable," Eleanor whispered back. "Just the way I'd envisioned him looking after all these years."

"Stereoholography, *señora*. We had to get his sons' permission, of course. It took some doing. —Has he sung lead yet?"

"'Strawberry Fields Forever.' Utterly convincing, Carlos. Utterly." She spoke the truth. Her eyes were still moist from the eidolon's performance. In fact, she had been wiping her eyes every other minute since the concert began.

Never in Eleanor's life had she undergone such a joyous but emotionally racking experience. It was the same for almost everybody else in the hall. This feeling — this thankful and expectant gaiety — had more to do with the aura of long-deferred rapprochement emanating from the performers than with the songs they had chosen to celebrate their public reconciliation. The songs heightened the general breathless gaiety, of course, but they had not created it, and they did not sustain it. Something else was at work. Eleanor discovered at the heart of this unlikely get-together a gospel akin to the one she had taken into the field with her splints, bandages, pills, and spray-on antiseptics.

A short while ago these aging Beatles, and one utterly convincing apparition, had sung "All You Need Is Love." And, setting aside the demonstrable impracticality of this precept, a roomful of men and women who had suffered the most insidious kinds of mental and physical abuse (death threats, beatings, the disappearance of friends and family members, solitary

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confinement, burnings, applications of electric shock, rape, sexual mutilation, and so on and so on) ... why, these same men and women had listened to "All You Need Is Love" — on its face nothing but bouncy, idealistic cant — as if the song's repetitive lyric actually embodied a solution to the world's ills. Absurd. Crazy. Tomorrow, of course, they would all know better again, but tonight — ah, tonight — they had willingly suspended their disbelief, their adult disbelief, in the foolish notion of universal amity. They felt in their hearts that this hungry spot of localized happiness could spread across the entire human dominion, eclipsing darkness and hatred with light and the healing power of love.

Absurd. Crazy.

A pudding-pated dream for nursery schoolers.

McCartney finished his poignant solo on "Yesterday," and a pair of overlapping theatrical lasers lifted the wizened face of Ringo Starr into the front-and-center relief. He did a flashy bit of business with his sticks, and the cymbals on his drum kit reverberated with a noise like hail hitting tin.

"We've got a request for a song we just can't do anymore," he said. "It's called 'When I'm Sixty-Four.' We've got beyond such childishness, I'm afraid." (Eleanor laughed along with the rest of the audience.) "We could change it to 'When I'm Eighty-Four,' but it would be hard to credit so arbitrary a sub-stee-TOO-shun, it being based so baldly on the fleetin' feet of time."

"Time's got bald feet?" inquired the stereoholographic image of Lennon, looking up impishly from the fingerboard of its guitar.

More laughter. This contained as well as amusement a wave of startled admiration for the verisimilitude of the effect. Until now, the Lennon analogue had merely played and sung.

"Yes. Well," said Ringo Starr. "I'm not going to play footsie with you on that one, John me lad." He struck the cymbals a crisp, emphatic blow. "Besides, I didn't speak up to announce another song. I spoke up to say we've got an extra special guest on the premises, and it's me duty — me pleasure, I should say — to intromit 'im."

"Intro*duce*," said Harrison, looking pained.

"I looked up the word, George. It's *intromit*. It means 'to cause or permit to enter—"

"Ha!" barked the Lennon analog.

" '—to introduce or admit.' It's a portmanteau word, see? It's got a coupla meanings bagged up in one package. I'm only saying what I mean."

"Who is it, then?" Harrison demanded. "Out with it."

Oh, no, thought Eleanor. They're not going to take public notice of me, are they? Everyone knows *I'm* here. What a waste of time. Then she recalled that Starr had said "him" instead

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of "her." She looked at Carlos, but Carlos kept staring upward at the performers, and suddenly her heart began to beat very fast and one of her eyelids to flutter.

"Patience, podner," said Starr. "Patience, patients." He played a roll. "Here from Maracaibo, Venezuela, direct from *El Teatro Clásico Nacional*, is Adolfo Domingo Galvez. Get out here, Alfie. This is what it's all about, rejoining for a pretty instant what fate and time and various sorts of lawsuits have put asunder. Enter, Alfie, do."

Half-aghast, half-exhilarated, Eleanor sat helpless as her estranged husband emerged from the wings of the tiny stage and strolled past the four applauding musicians to the footlights. Adolfo looked sleek, gray, and uncertain. A small moustache of sweat beaded his upper lip.

This is just like *Queen for a Day* or *Truth or Consequences* or *This Is Your Life*, Eleanor thought. Or any one of a dozen others of those shamelessly corny video concoctions of her distant girlhood, programs that delighted in wringing pathos, warmth, and high ratings from artfully engineered, otherwise inconceivable reunions. Her own enjoyment of such spectacles had always been tinged with guilt, a feeling of unseemly eavesdropping on others' private affairs, and also with skepticism, the knowledge that these extravagant hugs and hallelujahs were the products of media selectivity and media hype. Tomorrow one of the reunited parties might sue the other for divorce or end their relationship forever with a handgun blast. Not often, to be sure, but it did happen.... Then again, only a committed misanthrope could deny that, more often than not, the game-show moguls — admittedly, for less than altruistic reasons of their own — actually increased their contestants' paltry stores of happiness. Good was done, hope was affirmed, and many, many boxes of laundry detergent were sold.

Queen for a Day.

Adolfo was holding the harmonica that Carlos had brought into her room back in October. *"Vengas, querida,"* he said when the applause from both the musicians and the audience had died. "You must perform with these gentlemen."

"No," said Eleanor. "I can't." But her voice was a feeble thing, her refusal a *pro forma* cry for pity.

"Of course you can," Carlos Villar assured her, and before she could protest again, he had gripped the handles of her wheelchair and pushed it onto the mechanical lift at the eastern end of the stage. This platform carried her upward, and Adolfo, after touching his lips to her forehead, pulled her clear of the lift and positioned her chair so that she was facing the silent but palpably supportive crowd. Gently, almost reverentially, he put the harmonica into her hands and kissed her again on the brow.

"This one's 'Love Me Do,'" McCart-

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ney announced. "John's got the vocal, but Mrs. Galvez has the mouth-organ riff.... *One, two—*"

The group began to play. The houselights dimmed again, Adolfo stepped aside, and the Lennon analogue rasped out the lyrics of his funereal-sounding love song. Meanwhile, the hospital staff and the recovering torture victims clapped their hands in time. Eleanor, trembling, raised the harmonica to her lips. "Take it!" McCartney cried, urging her to essay the solo on her instrument, but she shook her head. She couldn't. The band backed up, deforming the little song to compensate for her reluctance. Even more surprising, the stereoholographic image of Lennon drifted across the stage and superimposed itself on her person by sitting down with her in the wheelchair. Now the eidolon of the dead musician seemed to be buttressing her, strengthening her resolve by inhabiting her body. Eleanor felt invigorated by this circumstance, enlarged. And with the aid of the Lennon analogue she played the crucial harmonica riff.

During and after her brief performance the hall shook with applause and spontaneous cries of "Bravo, Mrs. Galvez!" and "Thattagirl!" Her head reeled. Her heart pounded. The Lennon analogue separated from her, and Adolfo reappeared to help her back to her place between Karen Petitt and Carlos Villar.

The neurologist, however, graciously gave up her seat to Adolfo, and before Eleanor could reorient herself to her swift transposition back into the audience, the group onstage was singing something new. Something old, rather. What the devil! Old or new, the driving rhythms of the piece were summoning memories that belonged to another era: Susan Carmack, *Revolver*, the bittersweet torment of her high school years. Only the words were different:

Eleanor Riggins
Plucks at our hearts
With a courage so icy it's hot.
We've not forgot.

Brought us together,
Singing our songs
For the last rockin' time of our lives.
Magic survives.

Such a gritty lady,
Her work is never done.
Such a pretty lady,
She lifts us to the sun.

There was more, including a gorgeous communal rendition of Lennon's "Happy Xmas (War Is Over)," but Eleanor could not take it all in. She held Adolfo's hand. At the conclusion of the concert she smiled and nodded at the patients, staff members, and outside well-wishers who filed by her chair to offer their congratulations. She even spoke to the individual Beatles — once, that is, the hall had emptied of everyone but Adolfo, Dr.

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Petitt, Carlos Villar, and the musicians themselves. What they said to her she scarcely heeded. Their presence in the building, in Warm Springs, spoke for them, eloquently. What she said to them, on the other hand, had very little importance beyond its bemused communication of her gratitude.

In one otherwise inconsequential eddy of time, at a place far from the centers of world power, something undeniably good had happened. Tomorrow, of course, the bombs might fall, or tentacled aliens invade, or the planet spin off its orbit into an irreversible collision course with the sun. No matter. Something good had happened.

Queen for a Day, thought Eleanor as her husband propelled her down the gloomy corridor to her room. Queen for a Day.

Rewarded by Video Verdadero with an extended leave of absence, Carlos Villar flew from Bogotá to the capital city of Guacamayo. From there he took a bus to the medical compound where *señora* Galvez had worked for so many years. It seemed to him, walking the grounds of Casa Piadosa, that he had come to a place combining the lingering horror of Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and Dachau with the sanctity of a religious shrine. Driven by an altogether spontaneous impulse, he fell to his knees and kissed the ambiguous earth. Then he stood, wiped the dirt from his hands, and returned to Ciudad Guacamayo for dinner with the president of a South American vidcom firm in competition with Video Verdadero. After this dinner, back in his hotel, he learned that early that morning Eleanor Riggins-Galvez had died.

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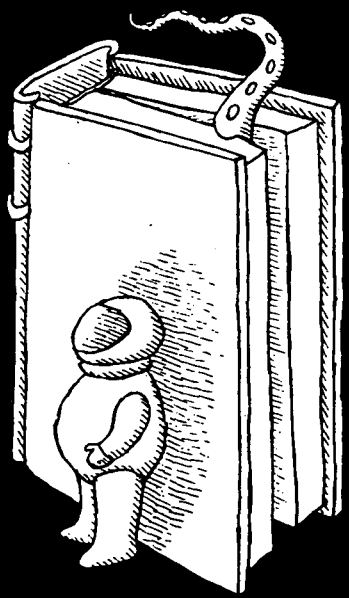
Books

ALGIS BUDRYS



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

Over My Shoulder; Reflections on a Science Fiction Era. The Autobiography of Lloyd Arthur Eshbach, with an Introduction by Algis Budrys; Oswald Train: Publisher, P.O. Box 1891, Philadelphia, PA 19105, $20.00, postpaid.

The history of SF resounds with the names of obscure pioneers. I'm reminded of the Indiana Toll Road, whose rest stops are called after famous sons of the Hoosier State: George Ade Plaza, Booth Tarkington Plaza, Fallen Timbers ... no, that's Ohio.... We, too, have our catechism of milestones: Farnsworth Wright, F. Orlin Tremaine, T. O'Conor Sloane....*

Names, names.... Harry Bates, editor of *Astounding Stories*, author of "Farewell to The Masters," from which *The Day the Earth Stood Still* was made. (Bates received $200 from the sale of the rights.) Thomas Calvert McClary, cursed by an apt middle name, but one hell of a top gun nonetheless, gracious, fun to listen to ... gone; gone with Captain S.P. Meek, U.S.A., gone with Otis Adelbert Kline, gone with Aladra Septama. To the Roddenberry/Tolkien generation, they are fortunate if they are names at all. The desert wind blows fine grains through their ruins.

**and The Man Nobody Knows, Arthur H. Lynch, editor of* Amazing Stories *for six months in 1929, successor to Hugo Gernsback after the Onlie Begettor had lost hold of the property he'd founded in 1926.*

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But you'd be surprised who's still alive and feisty. Take Lloyd Arthur Eshbach, b. 1910, first sale, to *Amazing*, in 1931 ("The Voice from the Ether"), most recent sale *The Land of The Dancing Men*, forthcoming from Del Rey Books.

We've all had the piquant experience of encountering our first recognized piece of SF, usually in our teens, and realizing soon afterward that our lives were changed forever. Well, what Lloyd Eshbach saw was Volume 1, Number 1, of *Amazing Stories*, and thereby our lives were changed forever.

Our lives? Do you read SF books sold by stores with SF shelves? The individual who comes closest to being solely responsible for that is Lloyd Arthur Eshbach. Up on the floors where the windows look down on clouds and you need an elevator key, and then in the corridors on those floors where you have to give the secret handshake to ostensibly unarmed security personnel, and in that room beyond all the other rooms; the room where the door kills you if you get the lock combination wrong ... that is where the publishing conglomerizers like So On & So Forth keep their picture of Lloyd Arthur Eshbach, with the eternal flame unfailingly aglow before it. Or so it would be if they had even as much gratitude as they have grace.

That's aside from the fact that Eshbach was the first person to try the market for a book of essays on SF by SF people. And it's further aside from the fact that before World War II he was a pretty sought-after name among writers. He counted right in there with Jack Williamson, Edmond Hamilton, Abe Merritt, E.E. Smith, and that little bunch.

The writing ... well, I can't say I've ever read a word of it. That's a bit of an oversight on my part, but on the other hand there hasn't been that much Eshbach fiction in print since the earliest 1940s. Oddly enough, that's about the time I tripped over an issue of *Astonishing*, and discovered for the first time that there were actually SF magazines, my readings up to that point having depended almost entirely on public libraries.*

So I missed Eshbach the writer entirely. And I haven't seen Word One of *Land of The Dancing Men*. But, knowing Lloyd, I doubt if it's going to read very 1930s at all. Certainly his nonfiction doesn't; *Over My Shoulder* is fascinating for its content — it's an invaluable historical resource — but in addition it moves right along, propelled by good, clear prose and a nice touch with the pacing of the anecdota.

It's going to be impossible for anyone to claim a sufficient understanding of magazine-borne SF without having assimilated this work. There simply

**This is how you get to read books like* Black Oxen *by Gertrude Atherton, when you could be reading "Thunder in The Void" by Henry Kuttner.*

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isn't anything like it, nor is there ever likely to be. No one else articulate, with credentials approaching Eshbach's, has lived through the same span of time. And it was a crucial span.

Eshbach must be nearly unique simply for having been in the first generation of SF writers motivated by reading SF magazines in adolescence. Then, with that for a start, he became one of the first major homegrown SF writers, without significant professional creative experience elsewhere. That again makes him nearly unique among his contemporaries. And his contemporaries — most of whom appear to have been close acquaintances or friends — read, as has been implied, like the roster of a Hall of Fame. Great and near great, they shaped this field throughout that era between Arthur Lynch and John W. Campbell, Jr.; an era which to most commentators hitherto has been one phrase long: "after Gernsback, Campbell...." Well, there was a hell of a lot between 1929 and 1939 — 20% of magazine-borne SF's lifetime — and Eshbach, almost alone from among those megaliths, is here to tell us about it.

If that were all he had to tell us — and he tells it with the aid of 45 photos on excellent paper, plus appendices,* plus an index, plus the clear and circumstantial text — this would be the SF nonfiction book of the year. But of course what you bibliophiles want to hear about is Fantasy Press.

Indulge me. Let me set the stage a little....

Let's suppose you were struck by the desire to publish a book. Nothing could be easier. You get a New York phonebook, look up Exposition Press, and throw your money at the problem until the truck delivers 2500 bound copies to your carport.

Ah, this doesn't strike you as an elegant solution? Well, then, there is another way. First you get some office space, some furniture and office supplies, a 'phone, and ... well, actually, first you find a printer who will go along with you. Most publishing companies are started by people working for other publishing companies. This saves a lot of overhead until you get caught.

This is usually also a good route to building up contacts with graphics trades people, like type compositors, binders, paper and printing salesmen, and other wise older heads who are all entrepreneurs by nature and will help you put deals together. Usually, they might as well be in it just for the enjoyment of watching, because you'll probably go broke despite everything. Everybody understands that. They don't like it, but they understand it.

The other thing you need, of

*Including a listing of all titles published by all the main SF publishing specialists plus 13 minor ones, with a reprise of their activities and a roster of all completed copies, not just print-run figures.

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course, is a surefire smash best-selling thing to publish a book about. There are two ways to have a smash best-seller. One of them is to find something that will sell 500,000 copies nationwide. Another way is to sell 2000 copies out of a print run of 2200 because you have some way of attracting the attention of the 2000 people in a small group who have the money to buy your book.

That's harder — anything done on a small scale in publishing is harder than things done on a big scale. No one would ever do small publishing if there weren't some people who, usually first in innocence and then in love, fail to realize just how impossibly difficult it is.

Fantasy Press was Lloyd Eshbach's book-publishing company in the late 1940s. He got into it with some partners from the Glidden Paint Company, in Reading,* Pennsylvania, where he was an advertising copywriter. They put together something like $2000 in working capital, got E.E. Smith to go along with a very small fee for reprint rights to *Spacehounds of I.P.C.*, and they were off. One of the partners, A.J. Donnell — who, like some other people I know, couldn't stand being called Al — was an artist. Another was a bookkeeper, and the third ventured that he had an ability to wrap and ship books. What more do you need?

Well, you need not to be in Reading, PA, for one thing. No one seriously believes you can operate successfully outside of New York City. Oh, people *do* it; witness Arkham House in Wisconsin, witness a score of little publishing companies in places like Buffalo and Providence, San Diego and Yuba City, or even Philadelphia. But they do it by specializing narrowly. In fact, it occurs to this observer that a good rule of thumb is that the more obscure the publisher's address, the narrower its specialty has to be. Arkham House, for instance, in the days of which we speak now, was Howard Phillips Lovecraft's spirit megaphone, and let me tell you that before Arkham House did the job it did on HPL, he was impressively narrow. Only now that Sauk City looms a bit larger on the map, thanks to Arkham, can we routinely expect something besides Cthulhu and Solar Pons from Arkham.

For another thing Eshbach and his associates did wrong, they actually had business sense and training on the board of proprietors. This is vanishingly rare. Shrewd you can find on any streetcorner; sensible, in the good old way of probity, is not as common.

Number 2*a* on this litany of error is the fact that they dealt with the world straight up and down. They kept neat records, they dealt efficiently with their customers, and they did their Fantasy Press business on their own

*It's pronounced Redding, not Reeding. Sorry. But it is in one of the earliest-settled inland areas of the United States, and it doesn't hustle. Also, when they tell you about the industrious, productive Pennsylvania Deutsch, these are the people they're talking about.

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time, with their own supplies. (I, on the other hand, am still working on the bulk package of #11 X-Acto knife blades I lifted out of an unguarded art department in 1972; Ray Palmer owned *Other Worlds* undercover, in competition with *Amazing Stories*, while editing *Amazing* for Ziff-Davis; in the 1950s, in the last big heyday of bullpen editing, when every loft in Manhattan was jammed full of publishing companies bringing out twenty titles across the board from car books on through hairy-chested "true" adventure to huntin'-shootin'-scrooin', all you could hear going down the narrow aisles between cubicles was guys on the 'phone with *their* distributors, to hell with the boss's problems.)

Error Number Three, though, was the big one; the key man believed that when you said something, you meant it and were married to it. This is — Forgive me, oh former employers! — not like publishing at all.

These are actually, as you noticed, all aspects of the one central weirdness about Fantasy Press, which was that Lloyd Arthur Eshbach, to a degree rarely seen in our community, is not weird *at all*. It therefore makes perfect sense that Fantasy Press, more than any other of the score of SF book-publishing specialists of the 1940s, was responsible for the suicidally glorious task of defining the SF category book market.

You will find this hard to believe, but there didn't used to be one, and if there was, it was no good, and if it was any good, then "real" writers, recruited from other categories — real experts — would be the ones who worked in it. Ask anybody who understood the publishing business in 1948. Anybody east of the Hudson River ... i.e., everybody.

It's not that Eshbach invented something. He was preceded into the field by several crucial small presses — Buffalo Book and Hadley, for two — that were equally bent on bringing out hardline science fiction as distinguished from the bibliophile market for gothic fantasy.* It was as a customer of these operations, appalled by their inefficiency, that Eshbach got dragged by Fate, one step at a time, to the point where he cried: "I can do better than that!"

It's not that Eshbach was the only one who produced a book that looked like a professionally printed and bound book with a decent-looking dust jacket on it. He was one of the few, but Shasta and Gnome Press, for two, were very much in the same league ... at first glance. It wasn't until you took your Fantasy Press book home from the store and took a close look at the binding and paper, the cloth and the

Yes, I know about the Arkham House Slan *and* Dark Carnival. *I owned them and treasured them, and they were exceptions to the general impression August Derleth and Donald Wandrei were careful to cultivate.*

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stamping, that you saw how rare a thing was being done. It wasn't fancy book manufacturing for its own sake, as some small-press volumes were. On the other hand, it wasn't hard-boardstamped to look like cloth, and gold ink instead of foil stamping; the uniformly-designed cloth went all the way around the covers instead of just over the spine, and on the inside the creamy text paper, and the Donnell black-and-white plates on enamel stock, told you that this was value for money. How much money? Oh, two, three dollars. Worth it, too, even in 1946 or '47.

The whole operation was the same way. Eshbach — who in time bought out his partners — put together an impressive list of titles drawn from the preWar pulps ... for instance, Heinlein's *Beyond This Horizon*, Van Vogt's *Book of Ptath* from *Unknown*, Weinbaum's *The Black Flame*. But Gnome had *Sixth Column* and the Mixed Men book, Shasta had a solid Heinlein collection and a flock of other good stuff promised or in being. Other outfits, like FPCI in California, were constantly on the verge of doing something interesting.

The thing about Fantasy Press was that it did it solidly, month after month, reliably. You had the feeling it would be there next month, the same way, and the month after that. With all the good will in the world, you couldn't get that feeling about any of the others. You couldn't even get it about Prime Press, for instance, out of Philadelphia, where Jim Williams and Ozzie Train were doing interesting things but sporadic things.

In *Over My Shoulder*, Lloyd Eshbach recounts an anecdote about Walter Bradbury, one of the big *honchim* at Doubleday. He tells it the way Eshbach tells things; straight on, as it would have looked on the surface. Bradbury takes Eshbach aside — I would say up to the mountaintop, but Lloyd doesn't — and puts a fatherly arm around his shoulders. (Try as I may, I cannot picture Bradbury doing any such thing with Marty [the Other] Greenberg, or with Mel [Something Else] Korshak.) And Walter Bradbury says to Lloyd Eshbach, who by now has a list of thirty or forty killer titles out in the mail *and in stores*, he says You Guys are Crazy, Specializing Like That! What Have you Got to Fall Back on When the Market Peters Out, as it Surely Must?

And the next month or so, Doubleday followed So On & So Forth into the market, and bought out all the other wiseguys who cough when the big boys grunt, and wiped out Mel Korshak and Marty Greenberg* and Fantasy Press, but they didn't wipe out Lloyd Arthur Eshbach.

**This is not, as I hope you all fully understand by now, Martin* Harry *Greenberg the best anthologist the field ever saw; it is Marty Greenberg whose 1940s anthologies were ghost-edited by Dave Kyle, and who gave me my first job in this business, in 1952.*

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Phyllis Eisenstein writes: "F&SF seems to be lucky for me these days — the Hugo and Nebula nominations last year for "In the Western Tradition" and now a Hugo nomination for "Nightlife" (February 1982). So here I am again, this time with a dark and gritty fantasy."

The Amethyst Phial

BY

PHYLLIS EISENSTEIN

"Wine, innkeeper!" shouted the captain. He was a man who liked to shout, who liked to boast and to laugh too loud and too long. I knew him well enough, and three of the men who followed him through the open door. They were the hunters Lord Almyn sent after his special prey, after the folk accused of the highest crimes, of arson, murder, treason, crimes that could be judged only by the highest lord. They boasted that they had captured the wildest, the boldest, the most devious malefactors, and they had scars aplenty among them to show for their service. They had stopped at the inn often in the years I had been there, just the four of them on their way out from the castle, with chained prisoners on their return. Being just a single day's ride from Lord Almyn's seat, our sleeping chambers, our table, and our cellar were convenient for many travelers.

This day they had a prisoner, but I doubted they would boast of wounds dealt by him. He was the wretchedest creature I had ever seen, worse by far than the beggars one passes on the road, their arms outstretched for coppers, their rags and filth pleading mutely on their behalf. He was an ancient man, and scrofulous, the sores on his half-naked flesh running and fly-decked. His limbs had been broken sometime earlier in his life and healed wrong, twisted and knobby, so that he could not have walked upright even if his chains had not weighed him down. He shambled through the doorway, more animal than man, like some aged, crippled hound turned out by a cruel master, and as he looked up, by chance directly at me, I saw that one of his eyes had been put out, and the scar was terrible. That marked him, I knew, as a criminal already, and many

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years ago, by the look of that gray and puckered flesh.

Bron the innkeeper was busy with other patrons, so I scooped up cups and a carafe of their favorite wine and met Lord Almyn's hunters at the table they had chosen. The captain kicked their prisoner into a nearby corner before he sat down to drink deep of the strong red vintage.

"Something for him?" I asked, nodding toward the old man. He was curled on the floor, manacled hands covering his face.

The captain grinned. "Later, perhaps," he said, and he and his men all laughed together. Then he held up his cup for another measure, and when I had poured it, he said, "You look well, Mistress Tayj. You always look so well and strong. No overeating of Bron's fine food for you, eh? And plenty of exercise. I'll warrant you still swing yonder blade as swift and sure as ever."

I saw his gaze flicker past my shoulder, and I knew he was looking at the sword that hung over the fireplace. A plain and serviceable blade, made for use, not show, it was my own. He had seen me use it once, the day we met. He had pulled me into his lap for a kiss and perhaps something more; now he carried one scar that no prisoner ever gave him. We had had respect between us since that day, or at least a truce.

"I take it down now and then," I told him. "One can never tell when a skilled sword arm might be useful."

"No, indeed," he said. "One can never tell." And he drained his cup again. "Will supper be laid soon? I have a hunger almost as great as my thirst."

"Very soon, Captain. The meat is spitted and turning and will be ready before the sun sets. Now if you will excuse me ...?" I left the carafe with them because they looked like men who wanted more to drink. Much more.

We had eighteen for supper that night, no more than usual, but they kept Bron and me busy, and the kitchen maids as well. I saw that the captain and his men fed well, and I noticed that they gave their prisoner nothing, nor would they let me feed him, not even a bone. As I was bringing fresh bread to their table, I happened to pass his corner, and he reached out to tug my ankle, but very feebly, as if his fingers had no more strength to hold me back than spider webs. I looked down at him, and in the torchlight he looked like a pile of rags, not a man.

"Water?" he whispered, and his voice was as soft as a summer breeze waving a field of grain.

I brought the water, and the captain would have kept me from giving it to him save that I said, sharply, "We don't let folk go thirsty at this inn."

The captain frowned at that, then turned away from me.

I had to help the poor wretch drink, holding him half-upright on one arm while my free hand guided the cup to his lips. His hands were too palsied,

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too strengthless to find his mouth. He was light as a bundle of straw, his manacles weighing almost as much as he did. He had borne them for some time, I saw, for they had chafed at the skin of his wrists and ankles till the raw muscle showed, and, in one or two places, the pale white of the bone.

"Thank you," he whispered when the cup was empty, and I set him down gently, as if he were made of glass.

I touched the captain's arm. "What has he done?"

"Enough," said the captain. "More than enough."

"And he looks as though he's suffered for it."

The captain raised his cup and drank. His face was flushed with the wine, and sweaty with the heat of the room, the torches, so many bodies. To his cup he said, "Some would say he's hardly suffered at all." Then he lifted his gaze to me, and the grin broke out all over his face, and the laugh tumbled from his lips, and his men echoed him. I wondered, then, if those other three were laughing for themselves or only to please him. They looked uncomfortable to me, their laughter sounded forced. But not his. No, his was genuine enough, and it had a horrible undertone that showed it was compounded not of joy but of hate. I glanced at the old man again and wondered what he could possibly have done to become the object of the captain's laughing hate.

That there was such terrible hate in the world, I knew — hate that could easily bring a triumphant laugh to the lips of the one who made the hated creature suffer. Yes, this I knew. I touched the amethyst phial that I had carried in my bosom so many years. Yes, this I knew.

As the evening waned, many of our guests went to their sleeping chambers, until at last there were only a few left, a few who had gathered together about the fireplace for the warmth of human company rather than to combat any chill that might drift in from the summer night. The captain and his men were there, having dragged their prisoner with them and cast him at their feet before the flames. A handful of others sat with them, travelers whose business was taking them to or from Lord Almyn's castle. Bron the innkeeper had retired at last, leaving me to see to these few guests' thirsts and to keep the hearthfire blazing until the room was empty. I suspected that would not be for a long time yet, for these few had the look of folk to whom sleep came hard, no matter how much they drank.

The talk had surged from one topic to another, from the recent increase in Lord Almyn's tax rates to the potential crop yields in certain not-too-distant lands, to the feasibility of importing various spices from the south. I had begun to yawn myself when the captain rose and pointed to my sword.

"There's a tale in that," he said, and his words were slurred only a bit. "Tell

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it, Mistress Tayj, I pray you, for we've folk here who'll applaud a good tale."

They all turned to me as I shook my head. "It's not much of a tale, truly. You've heard it already, Captain. It hasn't changed in the last few years."

"I've heard it, and I say let these listeners judge for themselves."

I shook my head again. "It has a lame ending."

He looked long at the sword, and then he turned to face me, his back to the fire, and he seemed to block all its heat from me. In that sudden coolness, he loomed like a giant, and his voice was too loud, as always, like the bellow of some great animal. "I think not, Mistress Tayj. I think you don't know how good a tale it truly is. We have a long night ahead of us, and some of us, I think, shall not sleep at all. Will you give us your tale and so help us to pass the dark hours?"

I stood, and because I am tall, he no longer seemed like a giant, but only like a man who ate and drank too much and tried hard to keep his muscle from turning to fat. I had not been afraid of men like him since I was a child.

"Tell your tale, Mistress," said one of the strangers on the other side of the hearth.

"Very well," I said. "To please the captain, our very good customer. And you. But I warn you now that you won't be satisfied by it. I never was."

The captain grunted and returned to his seat, kicking the old man aside to give himself more legroom before the fire. The old man didn't make a sound.

I was born (I said) some hundred leagues or so from here, in a stout manor house surrounded by a stone-and-log palisade. You couldn't call the place a castle, but some did, just as they called my father "Baron." In truth, he was a small landholder, lord of a few hundred peasants and their farms. The region was border country in those days, claimed by Lord Ullior and fief to my father through him, but claimed also by Lord Caral. Every few years Lord Caral's men would come by and demand a tithe of the harvest, and my father would pay, though he had already paid the same to Lord Ullior. He could do nothing else, for they were an army against his handful of fighters, and he didn't want to see his people's houses burned. He had begged Lord Ullior often to protect him from this extra tithing, and Lord Ullior had promised, but those promises had come to nothing. So he paid, and fortunately our land was fertile enough to allow such double tithing and still feed us all. But it was fertile enough, too, or perhaps just strategically placed enough that there came a time when an occasional tithe was not sufficient for Lord Caral, and he had to have the land itself.

I will never forget that day. It was summer and very hot. My mother had just bathed my baby brother and was

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nursing him while I played jacks at her feet. I heard the horses — many, many horses — and, curious, I went to one of the high windows and pulled myself up on the sill to look out. I saw smoke in the fields — not the crops, but the little houses of the peasants, burning blackly. And then I heard the running footsteps and the ringing of chain mail and the shouting, so much shouting, as the men burst into the house. My mother pulled me away from the window, and her face was very white; I had never seen it so before. "Hide till they're gone!" she told me, and I knew from her face and her voice that though we had played hide-and-seek a thousand times together, this was no game. I was only eight years old, but I was not a stupid child. I hid in the chimney, scrambling up amid the soot, finding purchase among the stones and mortar where no adult could have. And I stayed there, my arms outthrust against the chimney's walls, a drop deeper than the height of two men beneath me. I stayed there all day, long after the voices faded in the distance, long after the last horse had galloped off. I waited for my mother to call me down. And she did not.

It was full night when I finally came out of my hiding place. Silent darkness; even the night birds and the katydids had been frightened into silence. I was stiff and sore, hungry and thirsty, and afraid, but I thought the silent darkness would cloak me adequately. By touch, I found a corner of the room, the corner behind my mother's favorite chair. I curled up there, just another shadow in the darkness, and I went to sleep.

It was dawn twilight when I awoke. When I saw Death for the first time. My mother lay only a few paces from her favorite chair. I must have crawled right past her in the darkness. She lay on her back, and she looked very composed, almost as if she were sleeping. Save for the terrible wound at her breast. Save for the blood that had drenched her gown and the rug beneath her, the blood that was dry now, and very dark. I had never seen Death before, but I knew that there was no hope of waking her from that sleep. Closer to the door I saw my brother; his fragile baby skull had been dashed against the wall, and the mark of it was still there, dark and no broader than my hand.

I went outside, and there I found my father, his blood mixed with the dust of the yard. His face was very angry, not like my mother's, and I kissed him, but the anger was still there afterward, and my child's hands could not wipe it away.

I wandered through the house, the yard, the outbuildings like a person in a dream. Everywhere were people I had seen every day of my life, people who had laughed with me and played with me and taught me everything I knew. Servants and men-at-arms. The kitchen boy. The laundress. The stablemaster. All were dead, every one. I

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was alone in the midst of death. And it was so quiet. Even the dogs were dead, their throats cut. And the horses had all been taken away. So quiet.

When I came to myself at last, I found I was at the front of the house again. And there I saw the pennon, fluttering from the shaft of a lance thrust into the ground beside the door. It was a pennon I had seen before. It belonged to Lord Caral. I was not tall enough to snatch it down, nor strong enough to pull up the lance. So I left it there. But I knew that it would burn in my memory forever.

I walked. I don't remember how long I walked, or in what direction. I ate nothing. I drank when I crossed a stream. I was eight years old and I had nowhere to go, no one to go to. Still, I walked. Eventually I became delirious. I came so close to dying that I thought I saw my parents standing in the road, their arms outstretched for me. I would have run to them, but I had no strength and fainted instead. Later, I found out that the two figures had been peasants, young brothers, bound for their fields. They took me back to their home instead, where their mother and sisters nursed me back to health. I became a member of their family. They could not have been kinder to me if I had been born among them.

But I was not born among them, and I could never forget that. Child though I was, I was the lone survivor of my house, and it was my duty and my desire to avenge the dead.

I was thirteen when I left that peasant family. By then I had learned to plow, to plant, to harvest, and to thrash. I had learned to grind and to bake, to weave and to sew. But I had not learned to kill.

I had told them nothing about myself, and they had never asked. Theirs was border country, too, and they may have guessed the truth, or close to it. All through the years I lived with them, travelers brought us news of the border wars, full-fledged battles now, not just between Lords Ullior and Caral, but including allies on both sides, and vast numbers of soldiers. My father's little holding had been just one step on Lord Caral's way to greater triumphs, the work of a single short afternoon. That did not make me hate him less.

I was thirteen, and tall for my age, and strong. For five years my hate had grown and made me strong. I had not fully understood at eight, had not known what that dry agony was in my chest when I looked at my parents, had not known why the tears would not come, would never come. But at thirteen I *did* know a greater passion than that for vengeance, that my life would never be complete until I ground *him* under my foot. I was strong. I would swing a sword. I would cut him down with my own hands. I had begun to practice with a cudgel, building my arms and shoulders and stamina, when a traveler happened by with news that changed my life.

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There was a sorceress, he told us, who lived under a mountain far beyond the southern horizon. She was a woman of much wisdom and more power, and her help was available to anyone, for a price. But this price was not reckoned in gold or jewels, for these she could acquire for herself — some said could even make by her sorcery. No, her price was rather some portion of life, some years, which she was able to remove from the petitioner and add to her own span and thus stay young and beautiful while ordinary folk withered and died. A high price indeed, said the traveler, but some were willing to pay it, so great was their need.

I was willing to pay it. And so I set out for the sorceress and her mountain, with only the vaguest of directions to guide me and a packet of bread and cheese under my arm. I set out in the middle of the night, and so my adoptive family never knew where I went, or why.

The journey was long and led me far from the domains of Lords Ullior and Caral. When I ran out of food, I begged it, or worked for it, or stole it. Later, I wove a net from fibrous stems and became a trapper. I made a bow and arrows from stout branches and animal sinew, and I became an archer. I lay in wait downwind of a water hole and became as stealthy a predator as any cat. Two years passed before I saw the sorceress's mountain on my own horizon, and in that time I changed from child to adult, from peasant to hunter. And still hate burned, undimmed, within me.

So close to her dwelling, folk knew of the sorceress and could at last give me more than vague directions. There was a road that led to her cave, though it was seldom traveled save by goatherds and the very desperate. Those who pointed it out to me shook their heads as they did so, but they did not try to turn me back. Better, they said, to let strangers pay the sorceress than to chance her requiring tribute from her neighbors. So they passed me and stared after me as I followed the goats to her mountain.

The mouth of her cave was wide, and the interior seemed dark until I entered. Then the walls came alight as if a thousand torches had suddenly been kindled upon them, or no, as if daylight had suddenly broken through the solid rock of the mountain. All around me, the walls glittered as if set with polished gems. I stood in a long, narrow room whose ceiling seemed half as high as the mountaintop. On the floor was a thick, plush carpet of colors that shifted and changed as I watched. And at the other end of the carpet stood a throne of yellow gold. Upon that, waiting for me, sat the sorceress.

She was beautiful, I suppose, though I've never counted myself a judge of such things. At least her features were regular, her skin unmarked by pox, her hair clean and well cared for. She wore rich clothing, sleek and

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flowing fabrics such as I had never seen before. One could not compare that cloth, or that place, with the things of the ordinary realm. I was in another world under her mountain; I felt that, and I felt, too, that by the power of such a world, anything was possible. I knelt before her.

"Rise, child," she said, and though I did not consider myself a child anymore, I accepted the name from her, for I guessed that any ordinary person would seem so to such a one. "You have a request."

I looked straight into her eyes. I was not afraid of her, though surely many would have been. My hate was stronger than any fear. "I wish to kill a man, my lady."

Her gaze was cool. "There are ways to accomplish such things without recourse to sorcery."

"He is a great lord, my lady, and well guarded. I am one alone. If I should fail, there is none to do the deed in my stead. I must have a method that is absolutely certain."

"The price for a man's life is high," she said. "A fortune in sorcerous gold would cost you far less."

"I have no need of gold."

She studied me for a long moment, and her cool dark eyes seemed to dive inside me, to spy out every corner, every secret of my young life. I felt more naked to her than if she had stripped off all my clothing. I fought the impulse to cover myself with my hands.

She lowered her eyes at last and leaned back on her golden throne. "Your hate has great strength," she said. "Strength enough to make you pay the price. I see that well."

"Then give me my boon," I said, "and take your payment."

She shook her head. "I would not steal your years for nothing, child. You don't need my help. Your path will cross his, and you will have your opportunity to kill him, and there will be no need for sorcery in the matter."

I stared at her. "Will I be successful at it?"

She smiled. "If you wish to be."

"When will this happen?"

"Some years from now," she said.

"How many years?"

She waved a hand airily. "Not many, as such things are counted."

"As you count such things, or as I count them?"

She sighed, and her smile softened and saddened. "Only the young are so eager to die. And you are by far the youngest who has ever come to me. Listen, child, I could take your years as you stand before me, I could drink them like wine and leave you an empty husk. And in return, in that very moment, I could strike your enemy down with a sorcerous bolt, and no one would ever know how or why it had happened. Perhaps you think you would be the gainer by that, perhaps you think you would rest well in your grave knowing that you had done your duty. But believe me, you will find life

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sweeter than death. Your hate is strong now, but it will fade with time, till it no longer governs you, till it leaves your heart with room for other feelings. Live awhile, child. Does it matter whether your vengeance comes now or a dozen years hence? Do you truly think your parents would be pleased to know you died so young just to avenge them?"

"*Just?*" I cried, my voice breaking on the very word. "Do you insult my parents, lady? They are worthy of vengeance!"

Her voice was low, and she meant it to be soothing, I know. "They gave you life, child. They did not give it so that you might throw it away after only fifteen years. You will have your chance, I promise you. And you will find peace — I promise that as well."

There was a great lump in my throat, and I tried to swallow it but could not. "Are you refusing to help me, my lady?"

"I am refusing the bargain you offer, yes." She reached out to touch my shoulder very lightly. "You will be glad, someday, that I was too honorable to accept it. Yet, I will help you, and without expecting any payment."

"How?"

"There is a great house to the east, at the foot of this mountain. Go there and tell Lord Vanado that I sent you. He will find a place for you in his household."

"And then?"

"And then your life is your own. But wait — one more thing I'll do for you. I told you the years would pass and this strong hate weaken. But you'll need its strength when you face *him*, you'll need it to harden your heart and steady your hand. Therefore, take this and wear it about your neck." She made a fist before my face and then opened her hand, and upon her palm lay a phial of deepest amethyst no larger than my little finger. At one end of it was set a silver ring, and through the ring was laced a silver chain that glittered as it rustled through her fingers. "When you meet him, break this," she said, "And drink the contents, and you will find your hate as strong as it is this moment."

Though I could not imagine ever needing it, I took the phial and slipped the chain over my head. And then I bowed and bade the sorceress farewell. I did not thank her. I did not think that she expected thanks.

I went where she told me to go. Where else could I have gone? I had a dozen years to wait, I thought, and one place was as good as another. As it turned out, her choice had been a good one. Lord Vanado welcomed me, and my life in his household was agreeable enough. More than agreeable. His arms-master soon perceived that I had more than a passing interest in weaponry and let me train with the younger fighters. Though most of these were male, there were a few young women as sturdy as myself in the group, readying themselves to stand with their

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brothers to defend Lord Vanado's walls should some enemy attack. Before too many years had passed, I had excelled these women, and most of the young men, too, with bow and sword. I was strong and agile, and I gave myself to mock-combat with a single-mindedness that others would have reserved for the real thing. In recognition of my prowess, Lord Vanado gave me my sword and a shield and helm and chain that would have weighed down another persom but felt like simply another layer of muscle to me. At twenty-five I was in my prime, and I would never be more ready for Lord Caral to cross my path.

I wore the amethyst phial still, but I knew that I did not need it.

Lord Vanado was sorry to see me go, but I told him my duty lay elsewhere, and I left him. Him, I thanked, for he had given me all I required to attain my goal. And he gave me a horse as well.

I was going to join Lord Caral's army.

With a mount, my journey was easier than it had been so many years before, but still it took some months. And as I drew near Lord Caral's domain I began to hear the rumors — that his land was in chaos, that he had expanded his territory so greatly that he could not hold it and other men were claiming bits and pieces, fighting his minions, harrying him from one place to another. Even within his borders no one seemed to know much more, though the burned fields spoke clearly enough of the chaos. There was only rumor and conjecture everywhere — now he had taken one castle but given up three others, now he had won back the three and lost the one, now he was beseiged, now he had broken through the seige lines, now he was sweeping all before him, now he was encircled and begging for clemency. Each place I stopped offered a different tale, till I no longer believed any of them and determined simply to go on until I found the man himself.

It was nearly a dozen years from that day in the soceress's cave — very nearly a dozen — when I came upon the castle. It was a huge structure, the largest I had ever seen, and all about its flanks the ground was churned up as if ten thousand men had led as many horses back and forth there during a rainstorm. I knew then that a great battle had been fought in that place, and recently. I went to the main gate and asked who was master of the castle. There were pennons at the gate, but I did not recognize them, nor, at the time, did I know Lord Almyn's name. I had been far away from these quarrels.

I heard it first from the guard at the gate, and later from the soldiers who had fought there, both victors and vanquished — how Lord Almyn had pursued Lord Caral there and beseiged him, how Lord Caral had come out at last before his people became weak from hunger, how the field had been

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churned by the blood of humans and horses.

How Lord Almyn had taken Lord Caral down into his own dungeon and had beheaded him with the commonest of axes. They all knew that part of the tale, and they relished its telling.

Once again I had nowhere to go. I could have applied to join Lord Almyn, but there seemed no reason for that, no reason at all for me to wear the chain and carry the sword and shield. No reason, indeed, to live. But I happened on this inn, and Bron the innkeeper was kind and friendly and a good cook, so I stayed. I put the chain and shield away and hung the sword where you see it, and I began to pour wine for weary travelers. I thought I had traveled enough myself. More than enough.

Had I left Lord Vanado's house too late? Had I ridden too slow? Or had the sorceress lied to me? I don't know. I know only that my path never crossed his, that my sword never sipped his blood, that the amethyst phial hangs about my neck to this day, unbroken. And I know, too, that the sorceress was right about one thing — the years have dimmed my hate at last. I have no need for it now. And no need for the amethyst phial, except to remind myself that I tried and failed. If there is peace in that, well, I have found it, though it was not the kind of peace I had hoped for. There is no more to the tale.

"You may have failed," said the stranger who had urged me to tell my story, "yet the man is dead. Your house has been avenged, even if not by you."

I nodded. "Still, it gave me no satisfaction."

The captain, who had poured himself more than one cup of wine during my chronicle, bounced to his feet now and stepped over the old man who lay very quiet on the floor. "Now I have a tale to tell," he said. "A much shorter one."

I shrugged and stifled a yawn. "The night is young enough for a short tale."

He stood with his back to the fire and glared at each of us in turn, his eyes bright with wine. "I have seen Death in my day," he said, tapping his chest with one fist. "You would think it, wouldn't you, for I've been a soldier twenty years and more. A soldier in my Lord Almyn's service. I was there in that battle before his castle, the castle that had been Lord Caral's own ancestral seat. And I had been there for many another battle, too, as we chased that villain from one end of the land to the other. Villain, I call him, yet we were no better than he. He wanted our land, we wanted his. I don't judge him for that. He slew hundreds, yet I have slain as many, so I don't judge him for that, either. In battle, soldiers die — that's what they're there for. To kill or die." He held his cup out for a refill, and one of his three poured. I would not have. He had drunk too much already. I could scarcely believe he was still on his feet, and yet he could

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speak and make sense.

"But some are not soldiers," he said, and his voice that was so often loud was almost a whisper now, as if he were telling us some secret that even the four walls should not hear. "Some, like Mistress Tayj's mother, merely stand in the wrong place at the wrong time." He drained his cup. "There were tents to the rear that day, far back from the battle lines. Tents for the wounded. He was a page, my brother. Little more than a baby. He held the basin while the leech did his work. And he always turned his head aside because he could not bear the sight of blood." He looked at his empty cup and then dropped it; it struck the floor so loudly that it startled the rest of us, who had been leaning forward to hear his whisper. He seemed not to notice the sound. "Lord Caral's picked cavalry came that day, outflanking us. More than outflanking. We thought they had run away, abandoned the battle. They'd been gone most of the day. Toward evening, they attacked us from the rear. It was hopeless, of course, and we devastated them. And then we discovered they'd ridden through the wounded first, and killed them all and killed my brother, too, my harmless little brother." He bent his head, and his glittering eyes stared at the floor. "For that I owed Lord Caral. For that. Perhaps not as much as Mistress Tayj owed him, but something." His hands made tight fists beside his thighs.

The silence that settled upon us was heavier than my chain and shield had ever been. I felt it stifling me. I knew how he felt — I was perhaps the only person there who knew exactly how he felt — and his outburst, more than my own tale, had brought that feeling back to me. But that silence was too much, it pulled too hard at the phial I carried in my bosom. I stood and laid a hand on the captain's arm. "That debt is paid, friend," I said in a voice almost as quiet as his own had been. "There is nothing more that you or I can ever do to alter the balance that's been struck."

Slowly, he raised his eyes to mine, and I saw a smile on his lips, a terrible grimace of a smile, and a moment later he laughed loud and long and wilder than I had ever heard. His laughter seemed to echo around the room, caroming from the walls to wrap us all in a ghastly exuberance that had nothing bright or cheerful about it. This was not drunken laughter but something else, something that made me step back from him.

"Some debts are paid," he said, "but some are still outstanding. Let me tell you what happened to the great Lord Caral on that day of all days, the day after my brother died." His voice was low now, a drunk's voice, but a drunk in command of himself. "We stormed the castle at last, and I was in the van. We laid them out all around us and gained the keep and fought from floor to floor till we reached the top — and *he* was there, and we took

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him. Lord Almyn knew what to do. No clean death for his greatest enemy, no! We dragged him into the dungeon and we stripped him and we scourged him till the flesh was flayed from his back. And then we put him on the rack, and Lord Almyn himself turned the screw until *he* cried out and begged for mercy. For mercy, *him!* And then Lord Almyn broke his limbs with a hammer, and with a red-hot poker put out his eye, just one eye, so that he could look upon the dirt as he crawled. For you see, we never intended to kill him. Oh, we put it about that he'd been chopped, but that was a lie. That was so no one would ever believe him when he cried out that he was Lord Caral. That was so people would kick him and stone him for a liar and a madman. By night we took him away, just a dozen of us, took him far and cast him into a ditch, broken and half-blinded. That was Lord Almyn's revenge on his greatest enemy."

He crouched then, and, grasping his prisoner's chains in both hands, pulled the old man into a sitting position. Amid the rattling of manacles, I heard the sharp snap of a bone, and the old man moaned and his head rocked from side to side as the captain held him. Their faces were only a palm-width apart, and the captain was shouting: "But he couldn't stay away. Beggar though he was, he came back, he dared to come back to the land he once ruled. He thought his rags and sores would hide him — but I knew him and Lord Almyn knew him, and this time the judgment is death."

I could scarcely believe it. I stared at the old man, at the helpless, filthy, scrofulous wretch that I had given water. Was this the murderer of my family? Bile rose in my throat. My hand went to the amethyst phial, clutched it hard, and it warmed to my touch suddenly, as if an ember had come to life inside. And I knew that this was the heat of my old hate, eager to fill me for this long-awaited moment.

"I asked for him," said the captain. "I begged my lord for this boon, for my brother's sake, that I could be the one to dispatch him." Slowly, he lowered the old man to the floor, slowly, so as not to crack that aged skull like an egg upon the boards. "My lord was kind, for I have served him well these many years. He gave this creature into my hands. But I knew there was one more deserving of sweet revenge than myself. I heard your tale, Mistress Tayj. So I brought him to you. And now I leave him to your tenderness." He rose and stepped away from the old man's trembling form, stepped toward the fireplace and, reaching up, took down the sword and offered it to me. "Drink from your phial, Misstress Tayj, and do as your hate bids you."

I took the sword from his hands. It was cool against my palm. I looked down at the prisoner. "You were Lord Caral?" I said.

He gave the faintest of nods. His

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one eye was looking up at me. Now that I stared at it, I could see that it had a cloudiness upon it. His vision was nearly gone.

I let the tip of my blade fall to within a finger's-breadth of his throat. "Why did you return?" I asked.

His voice was the faintest of whispers, but it sounded loud against the silence of that room. He said, "To die at home."

I looked at the tip of my blade. I looked at the parchment-thin skin that lay beneath it, the pulse in the throat like a tiny animal struggling to get out. I said, "Then I will oblige you," and with a single swift motion I had opened that pulse, that throat, that flesh, and let the life out of them.

The captain's men and the other guests sighed softly, as if they had all been holding their breath together, waiting for my stroke. And the captain said, in quite a low voice, "For her family. And for my brother." He lifted a hand then, as if in toast, not seeming to notice that there was no wine cup in it. Or perhaps the gesture was a salute in farewell. When he turned to me at last, I was already setting my sword back on its hooks above the hearth. I had wiped the blade carefully upon my apron and left a dark smear that looked much like beef or chicken blood.

"You didn't drink from your phial," he said.

"No," I told him, looking back down at the limp bundle that had once been a powerful lord. I pulled the silver chain over my head and held its amethyst pendant for a moment. The phial was still warm with hatred so many years old. The sorceress had said I would need it to harden my heart and strengthen my arm. But she had been wrong, on one count at least. "I didn't drink because I didn't strike for my brother or for yours or for any sort of vengeance. I struck out of pity." And I turned and flung the amethyst phial into the fireplace, where it shattered against the logs and made them hiss and sputter and flare bright.

The captain gripped my arm so hard that a weaker person would have flinched. "Pity?" he said.

I nodded. "He had suffered enough. I gave him peace."

His face grew redder than I had ever seen it, and his eyes widened so much that I thought they might burst from his head. "Peace!" he roared. "I should have killed him myself!" And he began to shake me in anger, until I jerked my arm free of his grasp and gave him a shove toward his three companions.

"This man is very drunk," I said to them. "Put him to bed, or I will be forced to throw him out."

They bore him off then, up to his sleeping chamber, though it took all three of them to do it. The rest of the guests dispersed to their quarters as well, with yawns that might or might not have been real. Dawn would come soon, they said, and they had leagues to travel.

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I stayed awake the remainder of that night, stayed alone with that frail body and my memories. And there was peace by that fireplace, for him and for me, as there would never be now for the captain. So I stayed there, knowing that in the morning someone would come and take my dead past away.

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Concerning molecular transformation, in which the bulk of human society has changed into its favorite archetypes, ranging from forty-foot lizards to Chippendale sideboards..

The Mosserman Trace

BY

RICHARD MUELLER

The sign on the door read *MAGNUS NASH — TRACE.* That was all: just that and the shield divided diagonally, orange and green. There was, after all, nothing more that needed to be said. The orange and green shield said it all.

I looked it up once. Orange and green should not be used together heraldically. They are both *colors.* They should be divided by a *metal,* like gold or silver. Still, they evoked instant recognition. I knew. It was my sign. I'm Magnus Nash, Registered Trace.

There's probably not a person in the world who doesn't know that shield by now. Orange and green. Weeping Charlie. The Biddle-Strickland Effect. I buffed the surface of the sign with my well-tailored sleeve. Even I was impressed.

My secretary, Miss Kokonis, was polishing her perfect nails behind the hardwood desk. She was a Class One, one of the lucky ones. Since I had hired her, three years before, she had been slowly changing from Marilyn Monroe to Charlotte Rampling. It was a strange link, though, I had to admit, a pleasing one. Sometimes I envied the Class Ones, but if I hadn't been a Three-Percenter, I couldn't have been a Trace. It sure beat the job I had before the B-S Effect: a bank clerk. And I certainly didn't envy the Class Twos and Threes.

"Miss Kokonis, how many calls?" I said, adjusting the belt on my London Fog, which had been cramping my shorts. Miss Kokonis flipped open the appointment book and consulted it coolly.

"Sixteen, Mr. Nash," she said in her husky, English tones. They were a definite improvement on the Marilyn

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Monroe gush she had affected when I'd hired her, but with Class Ones running at only twenty percent, give or take, I couldn't afford to be choosy. And no Trace would dare to hire a Two or Three.

"You screen them?"

"Yes, Mr. Nash. And arranged them in order of interest, but there's a more pressing problem. In your office."

"Oh?" I said, cocking a practiced eyebrow.

"Yes. A Dr. Stanley Mosserman."

"How many times have I told you, no one waits ..." and then it hit me. There was a Dr. Mosserman connected with the original Biddle-Strickland Effect. Stanley Mosserman. This one could be something special. I grinned. "Thanks, kid. Ya done good."

"My pleasure, Shamus," she said, and winked. I laughed and went into my office. She knows I like that detective stuff.

Mosserman reposed in the chair opposite my desk. Filled it, rather. He was a perfect Orson Welles. I whistled and tapped my forefingers to the side of my nose. He nodded acknowledgment of the compliment.

"Thank you, Mr. Nash," he rumbled. "I took great pains with my Welles. I do hope I can keep it for a while."

"The Greenstreet didn't suit you?" I asked, cleverly showing off my knowledge of his personal history. He shrugged massive shoulders.

"Admirably, Mr. Nash, but there was a moletrans in between," he said, looking slightly gassy. "Gert Frobe. A fine actor, but somewhat lacking in ..."

"Presence?"

"Precisely."

"Have you considered Zero Mostel?" He fixed me with a jaundiced glare and I quickly changed the subject. "Why have you need of a Trace?"

"Urrumph. I am sure that you, as a Trace, know the basics of the Biddle-Strickland Effect, but let me recapitulate, if you will. Not only is it *infra dignitatem* to my persona, but the story could turn out to be somewhat complex. Bear with."

"Proceed."

"Thank you." He lit a massive Corona Monstro and settled back. "As you know, I was the physician originally consulted by Biddle and Strickland regarding their initial transformation."

"Abbott and Costello."

"Correct. Comedic archetypes. I myself prefer something a bit more dignified. At any rate, the pollen of the Weeping Charlie flower they presented me brought about my first transformation. They had also spread the little mothers all over the San Fernando Valley, and, within a few hours, all of Los Angeles was in chaos. Within a month, the first cases had appeared as far away as New York, Vancouver, and Mexico City. By summer they had been introduced into Europe and Asia, and the very foundations of civilization ..."

"... were in deep otter-water."

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"As you say," Mosserman demurred. "Charmingly graphic, if a bit imprecise. It was the establishment of the Molecular Transformation Authority that saved our remnant civilization. The division into Classes, and you Three-Percenters" — he nodded, to forestall any interruptions from me — "made a great deal of sense. The Class Ones could run society. The Class Twos could be given jobs of limited authority, as they were only intermittently sapient. After all, to be an intelligent bear is one thing, but when the bear begins to change into a forty-foot lizard, it tends to weaken any connections with the trappings of civilization. And the Class Threes ..."

I shuddered. About thirty percent of the population were rated as Class Threes; people who had become plots of Bermuda grass, Chippendale sideboards, tea sets, Gideon Bibles, elegant Karistan carpets, and eighteen-wheeled diesel trucks. When they were detected, they were sent to large reservations where they could end their days as color televisions or Coke machines. Molecular transformation for the Class Threes was a horrible prospect, and yet, considering that the Class Three was fulfilling his archetype, perhaps there was some perverse happiness in it. Only the Class Threes knew, and they neither could, nor would tell.

"... And you Three-Pers, the ones unaffected by the B-S Effect; you are the true watchdogs of our civilization." I nodded graceful acknowledgment. "You are the Traces. You follow the transformations back. You keep track of our roots, so to speak. Our identities."

This was getting fulsome. "Correct, completely correct," I said. "And how may I help you?"

"Biddle and Strickland have disappeared."

"Oh?"

"Yes," Mosserman replied, shifting magnificently in his chair and tapping an inch of gray cigar ash onto my genuine Karistan carpet — certified Non-Three. "As you may have heard, they were last doing a successful Martin-and-Lewis routine at The Comedy Store. Many people seem to relate to comedians but few have the knack for humor. Biddle and Strickland are the exceptions."

"Very well. How does their disappearance relate to you?"

"It relates to all of us. It seems that they were very close to a cure for the B-S Effect."

Biddle and Strickland missing. Mosserman wanted them located. It could be the case of my career, I reflected soberly after Mosserman had lumbered out of my office. Conversely, it could also mean the end of my job. But if I could find the men who were able to cure mankind, I would be famous, a hero. I considered only a moment and then threw myself into the case. I'm that way, an altruistic kind of guy.

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I started at Biddle Pharmacies in Van Nuys. A fair Humphrey Bogart imitation named Ervin Birdsell showed me around. I had no idea exactly what I was looking for, inspiration maybe, so I kept my eyes and ears open and looked hard. The staff at B.P. had shrunk radically since the Weeping Charlies had arrived. Twos were unsuited for lab work, and Threes — out of the question. The remaining Ones were helpful, but, with a reduced staff, everyone had enough to do without keeping an eye on Biddle and Strickland. And since the two were leading the double life of scientist/comedians, their comings and goings were not a matter of accurate record.

"All I know," Birdsell mumbled, showing sufficiently Bogartesque teeth, "is that those mugs were never around when I wanted them. I can't answer for their free time." He rippled his upper lip. "Ya know what I mean?"

I did, and excused myself. I was leaving the plant, intent on a visit to The Comedy Store, when someone grabbed my arm. It was Spring Byington. I introduced myself and complimented her on her persona. She blushed.

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Nash. I try to do my best. I just wanted to tell you that there was some indication of where Mr. B. and Mr. S. might have gone. A memo. I think Mr. Birdsell concealed it because he likes being in charge in their absence."

"Understandable. Go on."

She fluttered. "I saw a notation on Mr. Biddle's personal calendar. He was most punctilious. It read: 'November 7, New York, Kapchek-Howard.' " November 7: two days ago.

"Kapchek Howard; what a strange name."

"No, Kapchek-Howard, with a hyphen. He's either English or it's a reference to his persona. Maybe Leslie Howard?"

And that's how a detective works, folks. To be honest, it's all look and listen. Ms. Byington (née Annaliese Mumpher) had done part of my job for me. The next stop was New York and a visit with Mr. Kapchek-Howard.

Kapchek-Howard turned out to be Kapstan Chemicals on lower Broadway, and Kapchek turned out to be a young Trevor Howard (á la *Malaga*). He was totally uncooperative and had me thrown bodily out of his office. I took a room at a half-empty hotel called the Millman and began watching Kapchek's place of business, trying to shake off the feeling that someone was watching me.

New York is depressing nowadays. The operative population has dropped to under a million and many parts of the city are deserted. Life is not a gay, mad whirl, and the Great White Way has grown decidedly gray. I staked out the headquarters of Kapstan Chemicals and settled down to wait. It didn't take long.

The secretary to the outer office was a pretty Claudette Colbert. (Those

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big eyes drive me bananas.) She looked sympathetic when Kapchek had given me the bum's rush, so I checked out her movements. She ate lunch at a Rexall Drugs a block from Kapstan Towers, and I figured that a bit of savoir-faire couldn't hurt.

"Miss ...?"

She looked up, wide-eyed. The Gregory Peck counterman ignored us. "Uh, hello. You're Mr. Nash."

"That's right."

"My name is Schimmel. Victoria Schimmel."

"That's a terrific Colbert."

She blushed. "Thank you. She was my favorite."

"Your first?"

"Yes, it is, but I have a feeling I'm going to start shifting soon."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I really love Katharine Hepburn. I think it'll be her." I wondered briefly why almost everyone went with movie stars, but then they are the royalty of our culture. The hell with it, back to the business at hand.

"I would have talked longer yesterday, but Mr. Kapchek didn't seem to appreciate my inquiries."

She laughed nervously. "I know. He said not to let you back in the door. I shouldn't be seen talking to you."

The lunch counter was nearly empty. Gregory Peck was posing in the mirror. "Small chance of that," I said. "Besides, I was only looking for an old friend. Leon Biddle."

Her hand fluttered wildly at her breast. I had a brief fantasy, then savagely banished it. This was business. She rose to leave, but I stopped her.

She flared. "Let go of me, you big lug!"

"Wow, you did that very well."

She blushed again and subsided onto her stool. "Really? Do you think so?"

"If I could do Clark Gable, I'd tell you."

She smiled shyly. "Oh, no, Mr. Nash. You don't have to. You're real." I felt something slip into my hand. What delicate fingers she had.

I don't want to toot my own trombone, but this sort of crisis point had happened before. When a dame makes a play for me, it could be genuine, but then it could just be someone's attempt to distract me: Victoria's, or someone giving her orders. Kapchek maybe. I pondered those deep liquid eyes for the space of many heartbeats and realized that they were getting closer.

"Mr. Nash, I ..."

"Please, Victoria. Call me Magnus."

"Oh, Magnus ... Oh!"

Her lips had been a cigarette away from mine when they stopped and her eyes widened.

"Oh, look!" she cried, pointing to the window. I spun on my stool to catch a glimpse of a little man, peering at us through the letters on the Rexall sign. With a start of recognition, he was off and running. I broke for the door.

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" 'Scuse me, doll. Hold that pose," I called over my shoulder, and then I was on the street. It was lightly traveled: a few cars, a sanitation truck, a cruising cab. A flatbed from the Moletrans Administration rolled by, laden with what appeared to be furniture, but I knew better. Then I heard the air brakes. A city bus was approaching the corner of the block. There, waiting to board, the nervous little man was eyeing me. I got a hand on his neck just before he lunged for the door.

"Unhand me, Peeper," he whined, rolling his huge eyes. I gave him a shake. A Peter Lorre — and not a good one, either.

"It looks like you're the peeper, Grunion," I growled, waving the bus driver on. "How long have you been tailing me?"

"Drop dead, Nash!"

I slammed him up against the brick wall and held him there, feet dangling. He wriggled, so I slammed him again.

"Ohhh, my back. You've injured me. Put me down, please. Ohh."

"Going to tell me what I want to know?"

"Ah, yes. Anything. Please, you're hurting me." He did look pretty bad. His face was pale and his lids stretched down across his bulging eyes like a sick toad. I set him down on the sidewalk.

"Thank you," he rasped, straightening his suit.

"Now, who told you to tail me? Kapchek?"

He shook his head. "No. Henjoy."

"Henjoy?"

"Yes. Henjoy *THIS!*" he screamed, slamming a fist into my groin. I clawed at him and went over, cursing my own stupidity. If it wasn't the oldest trick in the book, it should have been. The little man smiled down at me.

"That'll teach you to fool with Joel Cairo, Peeper."

Oh, Brother, I thought as I passed out.

I wasn't out long, but it was a few minutes before I could walk. I hobbled back to the Rexall, but Victoria was gone, big eyes, trembling lips and all. I felt a pang of regret in addition to the explosion still settling between my legs. O.K., I admit it. I'm a sentimental slob. I've had entire love affairs from across the room, gazing on beautiful women I hadn't the courage to speak to. But she was gone, and I had a job to do. I staggered back to the corner to see if there was anything I'd overlooked. There was.

A long gray envelope with the colophon of Varig Airlines was lying on the sidewalk. Cairo must have dropped it when I was wiping the wall with him. Inside was a ticket to Belém, Brazil, with a connection on Air Amazonas to Manaus. Manaus. That was where Strickland had brought out the original Weeping Charlies. What a break. And then a twinge from my southern regions brought me up short.

Was this a ticket Cairo had meant

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to use, or one he had meant me to find? Was I being set up for the big fall? I looked around at the empty streets, at the looming bulk of Kapstan Towers. Fall or not, it was the only clue I had.

I tuned my senses to a fine pitch but I couldn't detect a tail, and, excepting a minor faux pas on my part, the flight passed without incident. Kennedy Airport lounge was full of the usual types — a collection of Hollywood clones with a smattering of sports figures and historical personalities. There was even a Richard Nixon. Sometimes I wonder.

I got in line to clear through my ticket and found myself standing behind a rather oldish, weary-looking Dustin Hoffman. Odd, I thought. Most people choose an archetype in the prime. Perhaps there was some sort of perverse reason for identifying with a man who was obviously out of that prime. But wouldn't the wisdom-identification wish choose an Einstein, a Fuller, a Margaret Mead?

He plopped a leather travel case down for inspection and waited for the clerk to inspect.

"Name?"

"Uh, Hoffman ... D."

The clerk was young, obviously a rock star I didn't recognize. He gave a bored how-many-times-have-I-heard-this-one? look and repeated, "Name?"

"Dustin Hoffman."

I tapped him on the shoulder. I'd seen I.D. disorientation before. "Excuse me. He means your real name, not your archetypal persona."

"I *am* Dustin Hoffman," he said angrily. "I have no archetypal persona. I'm a Three-Percenter. I don't change faces!" He slumped over the bag, pulled out his wallet, and showed his identification. "God," he told the ceiling. "I am so tired of this!"

The clerk and I turned away, embarrassed. Hoffman picked up his I.D. "Can I go now?" he mumbled.

The clerk nodded sheepishly. "Wow, I used to see his movies."

Yeah, I thought, watching Hoffman walk off. The B-S Effect had really hurt the visual arts. It made me glad that I was a nobody.

The 727 to Rio was only a quarter full. I got off in Bélém and just made the connection with the Air Amazonas L-1011. The ride was cold, boring, with none of the old amenities. I sucked on a bottle of warm Brazilian beer and settled down to think.

Mosserman wanted Biddle and Strickland located, expecting what? They were going to save the world from Weeping Charlie. They were going to reclaim the Twos and Threes. All right, I'd lose my job, but I'd be a hero, wouldn't I? Not to the other Traces I wouldn't. And would I be a hero to all of the zlubs out there who would have to quit being Steve McQueen and Ali McGraw, or Harrison Ford and Karen Allen, or whatever? I began to doubt the wisdom of what I

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was doing. Well, if worst came to worst, I could always vanish in the old way: plastic surgery and a name change. The price of fame, I thought, as the old plane drifted down for a landing.

Manaus couldn't be too big. It was probably less crowded than Kennedy Airport, and many of the archetypes here would be animals or plants. A higher percentage of Twos and Threes. So, finding Biddle and Strickland should merely be a matter of increased probabilities, if I put my brain on it. ... It came to me almost at once: no television aerials. If B. & S. were in town, chances were they were the only Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis these people had ever seen. There was only one taxi at the cabstand, but only twenty seconds of even my bad Jerry Lewis imitation did the trick.

Manaus was going back to the jungle. I saw as many wild animals on the streets as I did people, but none of the people seemed too concerned by them. They were probably Twos. I left my bags at the Grand Hotel with the bellman and a tall stately crane with extravagant plumage. The bellman told me that the crane used to be the night manager and kept coming back out of force of habit. Then, with a new infusion of cruzeiros, the cabby and I headed for the lair of the two men who had started this mess.

It was a large, rambling warehouse on the Amazon waterfront. I passed the local a sizable slice of my expense account and told him to kill the lights and wait in the alley. Guns weren't allowed to Traces or on airplanes, but the detectors hadn't picked up the plexiglass jimmy in my coat. The lock was old and yielded at once, and I slipped in among a litter of crates.

The crates gave way to a lab straight out of an updated Frankenstein. I took advantage of dark corners and surprise to work closer. Tables of Bunsen burners and glassware seemed to indicate some kind of distilling series, with liquid bubbling through progressive cycles or purifications. That's all the chemistry I know, folks. A few underlings scurried around, but I saw no sign of the two scientists until I heard a shrill "Hey Dean!" and saw the perfect image of Jerry Lewis cross the room at a run, a smoking beaker in each hand, legs going in all directions. That should be Biddle, as Strickland usually did the straight man. A moment later Strickland (a.k.a. Dean Martin) appeared, looking suave in a lab coat and tie.

"Easy with those, partner," he said easily. "That's the last step. From here on up it's downhill all the way." He took the two beakers from his colleague and placed them carefully on the lab table. "With that essence, we'll be able to synthesize enough antidote to treat everybody."

"We'll be heroes, huh?"

"That's right."

"We gonna give 'em all needles, Dean?"

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"No, good buddy. Aerosol cans. We'll spray it into the air and everybody will breathe it, just like the pollen. That's all it takes."

I'd heard enough. I'd found the targets. My job was done. Now nothing remained but to pass the word on to Mosserman and collect my fee.

"Yes, that's all it takes Mr. Biddle. Mr. Strickland." What? The two froze, staring with goggle-eyes at the darkness. I froze, too. I hadn't said it.

The big man loomed out of the shadows, a gun in his fist, the Corona Monstro dropping ashes on the floor. I tried to make myself into a crate, wishing for a weapon of my own, a club, anything. The plastic jimmy was useless for this sort of work. I ground my teeth in frustration.

Mosserman moved majestically into the light, his cape thrown back to free his gun hand. Biddle's lips formed his name silently. Mosserman nodded.

"Yes, that's right." He gestured with the pistol. It was large-caliber and ugly. "The magic elixir, no doubt. The secret formula. The essence of certain orchids. ..."

"That's right," Strickland replied. "You knew we were working on a cure. Why are you here?"

"How are you here?" Biddle gasped.

Mosserman chuckled darkly. "I followed him." The huge pistol swung slowly until I was looking down a blue-metaled tunnel. "Come out, Mr. Nash."

I hate guns. I've always considered them a substitute for brains, and I had to admit that my brain was being outsubstituted. I rose warily.

"Mr. Mosserman ..."

He smiled broadly. "Save your breath, Mr. Nash. Yes, I followed you. I was behind you at every step."

"And the Peter Lorre clone?"

"No, he was ours," Biddle said. "You rode in on his ticket, huh?" I nodded. "He always was clumsy."

"And I followed your trace, Trace," Mosserman said with his cryptic Wellesian smile. "You're good, Peeper. You'll do well in this business."

I shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. These guys have made it a pretty sure bet that I'll be looking for work within the month. *C'est la vie*, I guess." It was depressing but that was life. I suppose I could always go back to being a bank clerk, though the thought of it gagged me.

But Mosserman just smiled. Bluish smoke wreathed his cherubic features, a fat, malevolent angel. "Mr. Biddle, please move about five feet to the left. Mr. Strickland, to the right. I wouldn't want a tragic accident."

The two went white but moved to comply. My mind reeled. I was going to be an accessory to murder. Or a witness, and I knew what happens to witnesses. I had to do something fast, but what?

O.K., folks, I'll cop a plea. Physically, I'm a coward. I don't like pain, and I'm real down on death,

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especially my own. The thought of large-caliber bullets tumbling through my guts, turning some of my favorite organs to hamburger, makes me sick to my stomach.

"Mosserman," I croaked.

"What is it, Nash?" he said impatiently, never taking his eyes off the two scientists, but I knew that he had me plotted. Exactly. He was at least fifteen feet away. I would be very dead before I could ever lay a hand on him.

"You can't, Mosserman. You can't kill them because if you do, you'll have to kill me and everyone else here." The other lab workers, local Brazilians, presumably, were watching from the shadows.

"Yeah," Biddle said. "Even if you killl us, no one will believe that you created the antidote. You haven't the background for it."

"Very perceptive, Mr. Biddle. And very true. However, you may have made a crucial error when you assumed that I want credit."

Biddle, Strickland, and I looked at each other. I don't know what they were thinking, but I was lost.

"Credit?" Mosserman went on. "Credit for what? For bringing back normalcy? For bringing back overpopulation? Petty politics? War? The arms race? Advertising? Mass consumerism? You must have cream cheese in your head. You see, Mr. Biddle, Mr. Strickland, Mr. Nash: I did not come to create disorder. I came to preserve disorder."

The great pistol spoke twice, stabbing lances of flame that stretched from the muzzle to the opposite wall. Along that trajectory, the twin lines intersected the beakers.

Biddle looked stunned. Strickland fainted dead away. Mosserman sniffed, waved away the cordite cloud rising from his extreme act of scieticide. The elixir bubbled on the floor, seeping away through the cracks, causing God knows what sort of havoc in the Amazon below.

"My God," Biddle gasped. "The world ..."

"The world is an extremely weird place, Mr. Biddle. It is fraught with lycanthropic movie stars and ambulatory meat lockers, with sapient monsters and retirement homes for furniture. It is also an exceedingly peaceful place, thanks to you two and Weeping Charlie, bless his succulent leaves. I feel that it should stay peaceful."

Biddle closed his gaping mouth and made to talk. He spluttered twice, then blurted, "Nash, you're a Trace. Arrest him. You can do it."

This was true. Traces had extraordinary extranational police powers when dealing with any crime involving the Weeping Charlie Effect. I could not only arrest Mosserman, I could summarily execute him if it seemed appropriate — and no one but another Trace could question my actions. That is, of course, if Mosserman were not holding that cannon. I jammed my hands deep in my pockets and peered

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at Mosserman out from under my hat brim, the way Frank Sinatra did in *Pal Joey*. It was my moment.

Mosserman tilted his head, as if to say that he conceded me the authority, and tossed the huge pistol on the floor. I winced, but the monster did not go off.

"Well, Nash. It's your play."

"Yes, Nash. Well?"

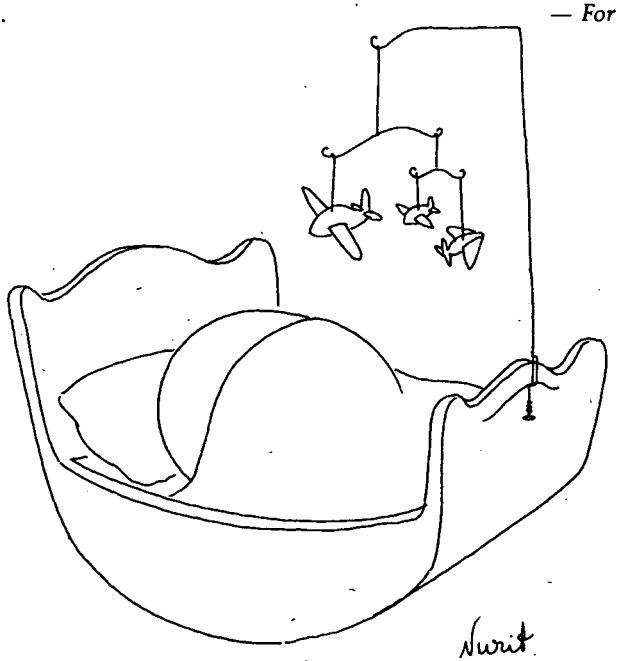
Well, well, well ...

My office still bears the green and orange shield. It's still a busy place — unlike the streets, which are quiet, well-lighted, and safe. There are no international tensions and little crime, though I suspect that the elm tree behind my apartment building might be a Three. But no one is paying me to look into that.

So, I shirked my duty. I didn't see a thing. So, sue me. I shrugged, turned, and walked out of that warehouse, out of Manaus, out of the case. I've sent back Mosserman's check twice and told Miss Kokonis to refuse all calls from anyone with that name. Or Biddle, or Strickland. Oh, I have no doubt that those two are back in Manaus, or off in Nairobi, or Bucharest, or Rangoon, trying to re-create their elixir. and Mosserman is tracking them, putting Trace after Trace on their tail. It's academic, I say. May the best man win, just so long as I don't have to judge.

I can hear Miss Kokonis filing her nails in the front office. The sun above L.A. is bright, the air free of smog. All's right with the world.

— *For Mike Hodel*



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Films

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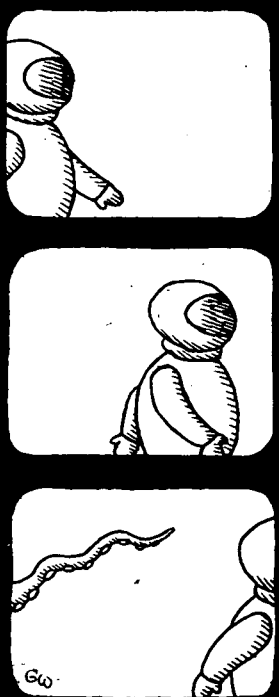

FIT FOR MAN NOR BEAST

It's again time for that annual ritual called looking at the new TV season, and after all these years, I'm tempted to simply put an opening paragraph on a floppy disk and load it yearly. It would consist of the well worn phrases such as ... the usual disasters .. by the time you read this I doubt if these shows will be around ... cutesy ... illogical ... sets the field(s) back 20 years ... etc.

There's certainly nothing untraditional to add this year. It could be significant that there are no real SF shows, certainly none of the space operas we've seen come and go. And not even a try at high fantasy, such as last year's *Wizards and Warriors* (spoofy though it was).

No, the prevailing theme this year was fantasy set in the here and now; the resulting shows could be called Thorne Birds since, like that dreadful sudsy miniseries, they are for the birds, and their geneology can be traced back to that pernicious influence, Thorne Smith.

Smith, for those unaware of the history of fantasy, hit the best seller lists back before WW II with a series of books that confronted ordinary 20th century mortals with fey or supernatural phenomena (a fountain of youth, the Olympian Gods returned), with hilarious results. His most famous creation was, of course, the immortal Topper.

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The word pernicious is used because this kind of thing has to be awfully well done (as Smith, let's be clear, did it), or it becomes cutesy drivel. And since Smith's time, this has been the mass media's idea of fantasy; the cycle returns again and again, and, almost without exception, we get cutesy drivel. Remember *Mr. Ed*? And *I Dream of Jeannie*?

So, segueing neatly into the current season, speaking of Jeannies — or genies — there is *Just Our Luck* which is the irrelevant title of the year (whoever named it was apparently confusing genies and leprechans). In this case, the genie is a hip black man instead of a lucious lady in harem pants. You'd think that might make some sort of difference somewhere, but nope — cutesy drivel. The main gag (what an apt word) is still that the twit Master of the bottled imp is the only one that can see him (usually), and therefore seems to talk to himself a lot. One joke held out some hope; the genie is uncorked in an empty room (the cat knocks over the bottle), and decides that the gentleman hawking Great Moments of Classical Music is his master. Regrettably things went downhill from there.

Then instead of Mr. Ed, we get *Mr. Smith* (after Thorne, perhaps?) who is an orangutan with an IQ of 256; like Mr. Ed, he talks. This poor creature, the creation of a laboratory accident, is immediately dragooned by the government as a kind of one orang thinktank. Mr. Smith moves into a Washington, D.C. mansion with his former trainer who comes with a dear little kid sister; the mansion comes with a domineering major domo (the superb character actor, Leonard Frey, who struggles manfully with a total lack of material).

The humor is merely an extension of that which is supposedly found in seeing anthropoids imitate humans; it is calculated to appeal to the people who laugh at dressed up chimpanzees smoking cigarettes. Perhaps it is oversensitive to feel that since the orangutan is an endangered species, it is a bit macabre to use one as a figure of fun. It can be argued that it will heighten popular feeling for the species. I tend to view it as featuring a man known to be dying as one of *Three's Company*.

Then there was *Manimal* which is about a gentleman who has mastered the art of biological transmutation; in plain language he turns himself into animals. I almost hesitate to bring up the fact that one of Thorne Smith's novels is about a man who is just that sort of werezoo. In that case, it was used for humor; in *Manimal* our hero does it to fight crime and wrongdoers. In the extended pilot, fighting crime and wrongdoers involves him with a woman cop (Melody Anderson) whose noseyness, ineptness, and just plain bad acting should have the female police of the country up in arms.

The special effects are confined to lumps crawling under the skin number that was effective in *Altered States* and already slightly repetitive in *An*

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American Werewolf in London, and the old man-to-beast makeup transformation. (we're only shown the man-into-panther change; details of man into hawk, pussy cat and shark are glibly avoided).

And it's probably petty to natter about details of logic, but here we have myriad examples of what could be called the classic clothes-of-the-werewolf problem. In *Manimal* our hero is always changing back miles away from where he transformed — but alwavs *fully clothed*. In one case it's really rubbed in because his shirt is clearly shown tearing as he pantherizes, and it comes back absolutely whole. Apparently there's a mending service along with the clothes transport.

Simón MącCorkindale, who portrays the hero (when not in animal drag), is one of those handsome sturdy English types who keeps a stiff upper lip — or snout — or beak — throughout.

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Here is a lovely combination: one of our favorite writers with a fine story about our favorite sport, tennis. (The title is the name first given to lawn tennis back in the 1870's.) Keith Roberts writes that the piece is autobiographical in one tiny detail; "each year I arrange a couple of weeks of afternoons, so that I can watch the incredible drama of Wimbledon."

Sphairistike

BY

KEITH ROBERTS

It's one of the more curious traits of the human race that the greater the marvels it's offered, the quicker it tires of them. I've read, for instance, that in the earliest days of space exploration folk got bored at a positively break-neck pace, took to turning their video-screens back to the endless, mindless quizzes we still enjoy, and moaning at the airtime wasted on yet another earthman ambling about the moon. Certainly the first holographic transmissions were almost literally a nine-day wonder. After the usual beggar-your-neighbor rush to buy the new gear, the family feuds just carried on in sitting rooms around the globe; the singers and dancers strutting between the combatants were dismissed as little more than background interference. So it's no surprise that Synths, now that they've become a commonplace, are no more regarded than the rest. Except, of course, when van Mechelren, the High Court whiz kid, throws one of his periodic junketings, and brings the name of InterNatMech once more, briefly, before the public eye. But of course the one thing that has never palled is scandal in high places.*

Maybe I'm being a little unfair; certainly there's no real reason any of you should recall the name of Col Lowston, professional *enfant terrible* and darling of the media. Particularly as his high time goes back to the last millennium — the Nasty Nineties, as they came to be known. I remember him well, from the days when he was a bouncy undergrad — irritating, charming when he chose to be, and with too much brain for anybody else's

**See my story "Synth" (London 1966, plus most other countries where SF gets itself read) — KR.*

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good, as one of his tutors was once heard to growl. I was up with him, you see, which makes me — but I won't dwell too much on that. Let's just say that like the king in the play, I'm the oldest man I know.

I suppose I was a pal of his, as much as anybody could really claim to be a pal of Col's. The attraction of opposites, or something of the sort: me, scratching along on a grant and fumbling for a pass via history and Eng. Lit., Col with Eton behind him and money still to burn, cutting every lecture in sight and still managing to come up smelling of violets. He'd always buck me up, though, if I got too low; tell me there was a lot I could do that he couldn't get near. "The humanities," he said to me once, "never were my long suit, old chap." Just how true that was, I was one day to find out.

I think there must have been times when we were both written off as lost causes. In my case it damned near turned out to be right, till I had a last-minute rush of blood and got my scrape pass after all. Col, of course, picked up a first-class honors degree, after which our paths rapidly diverged. I went on to — but it doesn't really matter what I went on to do. I made a living, for which I'm grateful; I also stagnated, while Col's star continued its hectic rise. Anybody who'd taken him for a layabout with more money than sense was rapidly disabused; he got his first Chair in a time most folk simply dismissed as indecent, but that was only the start. The letters after his name soon stretched half down an average-sized title page — a fact I had plenty of opportunity to observe, as he was producing books at a rate of anything up to half a dozen a year.

Which I realize might not be considered much of a trick in some circles; the thing was, though, that most of his trifles wound up being definitive. The subjects amazed, too. Electronics, engineering, biochemistry, cybernetics: *name a discipline, and it seemed he* was its master. He could explain it as well, in a way that left even a sentimental duffer like me not gasping too hard for breath. By that time he was already what they used to call a TV personality; what between that, his lecture tours, and some score or so of directorships, people wondered how he fitted it all into a working day. Part of the answer, certainly, was an eidetic memory: show him a book page for ten seconds and months later he'd reel off the text, to the last full stop. There was far more to it than that, though. I've heard it claimed that the average human being has the equivalent of twenty million volumes of information stored in his head. Dr. Col Lowston was very far from average; and he could access the whole library.

We kept vaguely in touch for a few years: cards at Christmas, reunion dinners, that sort of thing. I remember he even sent down copies of the first few of what he was pleased to call his scribblings. After which, between his globe-

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trotting and certain involvements of my own, we simply lost touch — for good, as I thought at the time. I wonder now if it would have been better if I'd been right; but that's a story I'll come to in a minute. I still continued to snap his stuff up, though, as fast as it came into print. As I said, he was a past master of exposition; but there was something else. When Col put up a proposition, however outlandish and wild, then somehow you believed it. Some of his flights of fancy certainly seemed crazy at the time, though one by one I've watched them all come true. Not least of them, of course, are the Synths.

He first mooted the idea in one of those innumerable books. *Notes on a New Humanity*, it was called; I've still a copy of it on my shelf. First edition, too: it must be worth a few decacredits by now. Not that I'd part with it. It's been with me now just that bit too long.

At first sight I thought he'd gone political; but I needn't have bothered. Col was born where politicians of this world leave off. What he posited instead was something so outlandish I wondered if he'd finally flipped his lid. One day, he claimed, there'd be a race of androids — or Synthetics, as he styled them — so biologically accurate that the only way we'd tell them from ourselves would be by their perfection: a perfection not only of the body, but of the mind. He then proceeded to demolish every new argument that could conceivably be ranged against his bright new toy. Metal and plastic prostheses had already replaced most joints of the human body, and had proved themselves far more durable than mere bone. A baby's hands, if made of high-grade steel, would wear to the wrists by the age of five; he'd done some calculations himself, and reckoned the estimate to be on the optimistic side.

What he proposed instead was a self-renewing, carbon-based polymer: in a word, flesh. How such a substance could be brought into being was wholly beyond me, of course, and for once he didn't trouble to explain; though knowing Colin, he had more than the glimmerings of an idea. As for energy requirements, planes had already flown by the power of the sun itself, drawn themselves into the sky like so many drops of dew. I remember pulling a bit of a face at that. Poetry, after all, was supposed to be my department.

The media of the time took the matter up with their customary enthusiasm; anything Colin Lowston said was deemed to be news. I watched the first interview he gave. He'd changed a bit since the days I'd known him. His hair, always thin, had grayed prematurely, and retreated to an appropriate professorial fringe; but the old Col was still very much in evidence. There was the same puckish lift to the eyebrows; the same calculated casualness; the same bantering delivery, half-deprecatory, half-mocking.

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As I said, he *gave* the interview; and that was typical, too. There was always an air about him, whomever he was with and whatever he was doing, that there was something somewhere else that was really more deserving of his attention. Maybe in his case it was true; or maybe I'm simply describing the Oxbridge of the last few hundred years.

The interviewer, obviously forearmed, tried something of the same approach; but he was wasting his time, he was dealing with another pro. "Tell me, Dr. Lowston," he said tolerantly, "are you asking us to *believe* in these ... ah ... figurines of yours?"

Colin considered. "On the whole, I don't think I am," he said brightly. "I've placed certain possibilities before you. Whether you accept them ... that's rather up to you, isn't it? Hardly my department anymore...."

"I notice that in your book you skirt round the problem of intelligence."

"Do I, indeed?" said Col, unperturbed. "Good Lord, I hadn't realized." He clasped his hands under his chin. "I suppose one *could* read pages 142 to 183, but this is a video age.... Have you come across Hubert Wolfenden?"

"*The* Hubert Wolfenden? British Computers?"

"The same. Used to be a colleague of mine. Well, Hubert's got a rather pretty idea. Sort of a semiconducting matrix. Like cotton wool. Or candyfloss. Chop it up by the yard — with garden shears, if necessary. One rather envisages ... ah ... stuffing it into the cranium." He looked thoughtful. "Connections to the motor centers could be a bit of a problem, but I think we can get round that."

The interviewer's look said a lot. "I was given to understand that brain tissue was somewhat more delicate."

"Oh, no, no, no, no, no," said Colin cheerfully. "Dear me, no. Doesn't seem to be really all that important, as a matter of fact. There was that chappie in the States, blew a crowbar through his head. Lived to a ripe old age. And there are quite a few hydrocephalus subjects with Degrees. For what that's worth." He looked apologetic. "Point taken. You're probably right after all...."

His would-be tormentor wouldn't relinquish the bone. "I take it, then, that you'll be sidestepping microchip technology."

"And why not?" said Col blandly. "Ninety percent of the bloody things are rejects anyway. Manufacturing faults. Rather inefficient, wouldn't you say?"

Then, of course, the inevitable business about library volumes came up. But he brushed that aside as well. "I'd say twenty million books was aiming a trifle high. Wouldn't need 'em, of course. I'd start with a couple of selections; say about a hundred thousand. Got to leave room for the dry cells, after all."

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"Dry cells?"

Colin smiled. "In case the sun goes in...."

The interviewer sighed. "Dr. Lowston, if we could move on.... What ... er ... sex would these creatures be?"

Colin wrinkled his forehead. "Now that *is* a tricky one. Too many choices, really...."

"I would have thought," said the other tartly, "that there were only two...."

Colin beamed at him. "Ah, there you go," he said happily. "The good old blinkered thinking — where would we be without it. There's probably two hundred. Or two thousand. As many as you want. Don't forget we're not talking biologically."

The interviewer set his lips. "Very well. Avoiding, then, what seems to be delicate area—"

"Not delicate at all," said Colin chirpily. He slapped a thin folder that lay on the table in front of him. "Had some market research people look into it. They suggest, initially at least, ah ... female. Considering the current state of chauvinism, I rather suspect they're right. Can't rush our fences, you know. Got to consider the consumer...."

The interviewer shut the notes he carried with a snap. "Well, Doctor, I must say you sound most convincing. But for the sake of us mere mortals, can you give me any idea what these creatures of yours would look like?"

"The Creatures of Prometheus," said Colin musingly. "Hardly flattering ... but yes, I think I can." He swung a keyboard in front of him, tapped out a code, and a monitor screen at his elbow lit up. The studio camera zoomed in on it, and cut.

I'd seen computer graphics often enough before; and fairly unconvincing most of them had looked. The craft was, after all, still in its infancy; now it seemed that infancy was over. The face that appeared seemed to build itself up from a skull; but that process was too lightning-fast to follow. The jawline firmed and steadied; the hair arranged itself, bunching round a narrow, embroidered fillet; finally and dramatically, the eyes opened. They were dark and lustrous, magnetic.

"A long-lost glory," said Colin dreamily. "Perhaps the Nike of Samothrace. But a little Classical, perhaps, for modern taste. Anyway, that sort of thing's all been done...."

The skin tones were altering already, deepening and richening to purest ebony. The zygomata broadened, adjusted; the hair plaited itself into a complex, jet coiffure. It hung in pigtails now, each bound with gold, each furbished with a vivid coral bead. She was exquisite; but she was melting again.

"Spoiled for choice, you see," said the voice-over. "We thought for a time ... the Eurasian ... ideal of female beauty, don't you know. But then, there's so very much...."

She was an aborigianal now; a

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Brahmin, with skin the color of palest coffee; an Egyptian girl from high antiquity, her eyelids dark with kohl. And still the skull planes changing, twinkling, modeling the flesh. "Till finally," said Colin, "we thought ... this is Mark Twenty-Three. Or it may even be Twenty-Four...."

I stared at the screen. The face that watched back seemed somehow blended of all that had gone before. It was, I suppose, that of a white-skinned woman; yet the overall impression was of bronze. Bronze of tanned skin, of eyes, bronze of her straight, lustrous hair. She, too, wore a fillet, as if she had dressed for some energtic activity; and she, alone of all of them, smiled, turned her head from side to side to show a profile Classic as the first. Then she was gone, and Col was leaning back in his chair, fingers steepled, nodding as pleasantly, as tolerantly, as before.

There was more to the interview; but I took very little of it in. I was curiously preoccupied by that final image I had seen: the image of something that didn't exist, in heaven or on earth. It was a face to challenge the mind, as the faces of dream-folk sometimes do. I was to see it again though, finally; then, it belonged to a personage called Dearbhla Cagnac.

Oddly enough, that was almost Colin's last appearance on what we used to call the Box — at least for many years. It was as if, quite suddenly, he had become bored with the medium, as he so frequently tired of people. Then, for no apparent reason, he'd simply turn on his heel and stalk away; I'd seen him do it often enough in the past. I've come to wonder since whether he didn't merely suck them dry, discard them when they were no further use to him. But maybe that's uncharitable, the general waspishness of age.

As far as I recall, he graced the little screen only once more; and that, presumably, was something he'd committed himself to and couldn't wriggle out of. He looked sullen and bad-tempered, and was brusque with the interviewer — a well-informed and unusually attractive young woman — to the point of rudeness. There'd been a lot of comment in the press, mainly to the effect that despite his claims all he'd demonstrated was an ingenious video; when charged with that he merely answered with Zeno's paradox, or rather his own peculiar version of it. If his Synthetic didn't exist, then nothing had gone away when the switch was turned. If nothing had gone away, then something must still be there, waiting to be called back to life.

When asked why, with his interest in the then-new field of genetic engineering, he wasn't content to let nature take its course, he answered with quite uncharacteristic bluntness that if the custard was ready, only a damned fool would set about growing

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rhubarb. And that was that. There was some talk in the press that he was setting up a new company, U.K. Synthetics, but whether in defiance or desperation nobody could quite say. Generally, he dropped from sight; and the public, lacking further stimulus, turned its gnat-span attention to other more pressing matters. Dr. Lowston and his affairs were forgotten, even by me.

I suppose my reasons were sound enough. The next few years were the brightest time of my life; they were followed by the darkest. I won't go into detail, because it wouldn't interest you; after so long, it doesn't even interest me. Suffice it to say that the business I set up thrived beyond my expectations, and that there was a woman. The only one ever, for me. Looking back, it seems the days were always sunny, and we were very much in love. It wasn't always sunny, of course; sometimes it rained stair rods, and we fought like cat and dog. That was when she'd swear she'd clear off, leave me to stew.

One day I let her, and there was no going back. There's never any going back, of course. Afterwards — well, it's a common enough tale, and boring to a degree. Except maybe for those who live it. I started keeping an odd bottle about the place; never felt too happy without one in the house. First it was a nip or two to help me sleep, shut the wind noise out on winter nights. The rest grew from that. There was an old boy round about that time who used to say that drink was the Devil in solution. I'm inclined to believe, after thinking about it a good many years, that he was right.

They wheeled me off finally to dry me out. That took a year or two as well. I'd get myself sorted, go back, start trying to pick up the threads; but there were the old surroundings, the old memories, the cupboard where the whiskey used to live. I'd hold out for months sometimes; then the slide would start again. And back I'd go, to the State Home for the Bewildered.

The last jaunt very nearly did for me. Leastways they told me later the prognosis was close enough to zero to make no odds. I thought so as well. Whether that knocked some sense into me at last, or whether I'd finally managed to sicken myself of the whole damned thing, I just couldn't say. But I know a morning came when I stood on the pavement of a little West Country town, and smelled the breeze from the sea, and knew I was going to have to get away — from the town, from the region, from a place I could no longer bear. I got on a train the same afternoon, and finished up in London. Why I headed there I still don't know, except that I needed people round me, streets; somewhere where there were no more distant hills.

Thanks to the kindly laws protecting madmen, I'd still got the remnant at least of what I'd built up. I sold out — lock, stock, and barrel — and sat

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down to count what was left. It wasn't a fortune by any stretch, but with care I reckoned it might see me through. I rented a flatlet off what used to be the Portobello Road, moved in some sticks of furniture and my books, and settled down to while away my middle age. I suppose you'll think that was a queer sort of existence to choose; but then, I'd done all the high living I was interested in. For one incarnation, at least.

Later I even got myself a little job, wheeling clapped-out antiques from one end of the market to the other; and back again, of course, ready for the next day's punters. It gave me a bit of beer money — shorts strictly out — and there was even the odd perk thrown it. I picked up a battered Tri-Vee rig for next to nothing and got it installed. I couldn't have run to a hologram receiver even if I'd wanted to, but the old set served; it helped to break the evenings up as well.

One of the first things I noticed was that Col Lowston was back on the scene — and not looking a day older, blast him. To my surprise, he was heavily into sport, though of course he brought his own unique approach to everything he touched. He'd designed a radically new type of golf club, with some sort of fancy shaft that he reckoned would increase a top-class player's drive by up to twenty percent; the various interested bodies were currently conferring about whether they'd allow the things to be used on the international circuit at all. Rumor had it that he'd spent a fortune on a racing yacht — designed by him, of course — that would finally bring the America's Cup back to Britain, while he was currently turning his attention to the humble cricket bat, with results that promised to be equally dire. I didn't know quite what to make of it. At college he'd always reserved his sharpest gibes for the flanneled fools at the wicket. I finally decided he'd made his stack, and opted for resting on his laurels; I only hoped they smelled a bit sweeter than mine.

I'd developed quite an interest in sport myself, in a strictly voyeuristic way. Still, the old Tri-Vee served me well enough. I'd always been a bit of a cricket buff; but to that the media magnates, in their endless search for novelty — and with six whole channels to fill — had added everything from pall-mall to jai alai. Even the wild, brilliant game of hurling was enjoying a U.K. vogue; it jockeyed for airtime with more conventional pursuits like baseball and golf. It took me awhile to get round to watching tennis again, though: rather too many painful memories.

I was drawn in, finally, by the great annual tournament at Wimbledon. I say "drawn in" deliberately, because the process was accompanied by a certain sturdy resistence. I was long past the hero-worship stage; I knew it was a hard, rich, cutthroat game, and entertained more than a suspicion that the

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glittering personages who played the international circuit were in it, first and foremost, for the cash. Leastways if they didn't make it while they could they were bigger fools than I thought; and they didn't look like fools at all to me. But there was always an aura about Wimbledon, a special magic to which I finally succumbed.

Maybe I should explain. In those days, cricket and tennis were played on stuff called grass. No blue or yellow mats, no ads, no blasts of organ music; just the wind in folks' hair, and the sun. I know there's a Wimbledon Centre now, of course — there's still a tournament — but the place I'm speaking of wasn't a high-rise tower. There were creeper-hung balconies, a great jigsaw puzzle of courts; the clouds sailed over, and the birds — on good days you even saw the odd butterfly. And that, I suppose, was the charm. Locked away as I was, and as I intended to remain, it was my private breath of summer, faithfully renewed.

As I began to follow the game, its personalities, all new since my day, grew into sharper relief. Chris Walewski, everybody's pet hate, who'd carved her way through the ratings, as far as I could see, by a combination of skill, brute force, and plain intimidation; Anna Schroeder, my ideal American, elegant and gentle, two Wimbledons under her belt and looking for a third; Cirri Pütsjarvi, the compact, cheerful little lass they called the Flying Finn; and many more. By which you'll gather I rather favored the ladies. That may seem curious, and very probably is. I can only say — and as Col Lowston once remarked, your belief isn't my concern — that I was neither an old fool nor a dirty one. As a lad, I'd been a confirmed balletomane. The music, settings and decor might not have meant too much; but the line of a great ballerina was a ravishment to the eye. In these top players of all — excluding the fearsome Walewski, who was an exception to every rule — I saw that line again. Aestheticism, you see, can occasionally remain, even when all the rest has been leached away.

It was a year or so later that Sarah Foster first entered the international lists. From the first, as far as the media were concerned, she was the Girl from Dorset; and from the first I was electrified. The long-tailed, sea blue eyes; the fair hair she drew up like the tail of a pony or horse; her pert lissome figure — all created emotions in me I find hard to describe; while the nation, of course, took her to its heart at once. Here was a girl, it was said, who for the first time in a generation stood a real chance of making it to the top; at long, long last, Britain would have a first again. Nor, proclaimed the media, was she remotely like the rest; she was someone to whom reward was secondary, someone who truly lived for her sport.

For once, I was inclined to believe the ballyho. She had about her a curious vulnerability: tomboyish in vic-

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tory, jaded in defeat. Sometimes, bite her lip as she might, the tears would well; the camera caught them, of course, every time. In interviews she was modest, almost shy: quick to praise her opponents, always ready to deprecate herself. She was, in a word, enchanting; and absurd though it will undoubtedly seem, my worry for her steadily grew. The hopes of too many folk were resting on her; those shoulders, at times, seemed far too slim for the load.

Somewhere in the world, there was a major tournament at least once a week; with the new satellites beaming programs down round the clock, there was tennis to be seen at all hours of the day and night. She seemed to be everywhere as well; so much so that I determined that somehow or other I had to have a Tri-VCR. There Ronnie, the guy I worked for, came up trumps. He was good to me over the cassettes, too; Which lorry they were falling off I never inquired; nor did I care. The recordings filled two shelves, began to jostle my books aside. Sarah in Athens, Sarah in New York; Sarah in Rome, Sarah in Milan. If grit and determination counted for anything, she seemed well on the way to fulfilling the prophecies made for her. She rose swiftly in the computer's good books; after a year she rated twelfth in the world, after eighteen months an incredible seventh.

It was at that point that I wrote to her. Why, I am unable to say; I'd never done such a thing before, and I'm not likely now to do it again. I hardly expected an answer. Nonetheless, one came: on pale beige paper, with a big cuddly panda at the top and the motto SAVE THE ANIMALS. There were few animals left by that time, of course, apart from us; what it really should have said was "Save the Zoos." It didn't matter, though; I was still entranced. I found a frame for it, hung it in a place of pride above the mantel. Ronnie, dropping in for the odd beer, looked at it more than once and pursed his lips, but made no comment. That didn't worry me, either; he could think what he liked. The envelope, with its exotic foreign stamp, I tucked carefully away; because her hand had touched it.

Then the bad luck began. First it was a car accident, which left her in plaster for weeks. For some time there was doubt that she'd ever walk properly again, let alone play tennis. How I felt is best left to the imagination. Suffice to say if I could have got my hands round the neck of the fool who was driving, I'd have committed murder without a qualm.

Not only did she play again, she won the Paris Open that very year; though what the comeback cost her, only she will ever know. It seemed she was on course again; but the respite was brief. A whole series of minor problems kept her from tournament after tournament; after which she seemed totally to have lost her form.

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Nothing went right for her; the old bounce and sparkle simply weren't there, and her rating, which had already fallen disastrously, slumped yet again. Naturally, the rumors started. Her name was linked with this and that jet-setter — all of which I discounted till news came through of a whirlwind courtship, marriage with a New York tycoon who must have been twenty years her senior.

I groaned aloud, not believing my ears. She'd sold out, it seemed: for a mansion in Pennsylvania, a yacht, a stable of fast cars. I realize now, of course, that I was wrong; because six months later the marriage was in ruins. She sold herself defiantly to the American circuit; but that didn't last long, either. Before the year was up she'd bought out of her contract and come home, reputedly for good.

It didn't stop the whispering, though: she'd retired altogether from tennis; she'd borne a secret child; she'd taken up with the Hari Krishna sect. Finally she dropped from sight completely, and the word went out that she had gone to India to study with a guru. True or not, somewhere she found the inner strength she'd been searching for so desperately; because she reappeared at Eastbourne, stormed through the opposition like the champion we all knew she could be. Next stop was Wimbledon.

A few days later I bumped into Colin Lowston. Almost literally. I was maneuvering a bulky chest of drawers through the doorway of the shop; the whole thing tilted, and I thought for a moment we were going to be in for some hefty damages. He steadied it in the nick of time; I said, "Thanks" automatically, then looked up. I said, "Good Lord...."

He was grinning his broadest grin. "How are you, you old bugger?" he said, "how are you?" He grabbed my hand. "Must have been centuries...."

I'd thought for an odd second that he wouldn't be pleased to see me after so many years, that he'd make some excuse and hurry on his way. It would, after all, have been far from untypical. Not a bit of it, though. "What've you been doing with yourself?" he said. "Where's your pad? I've got an hour or two to kill; mind if we have a yak?"

It was nearly knocking-off time anyway; I indicated the flat, and nothing would suffice but that he hare off to the old corner shop. He was back in minutes with his arms full of goodies: French loaves and paté, a generous hunk of cheese, a couple of bottles of plonk. "Bloody ravenous," he said. "Haven't eaten all day. Tend to lose track of time; sign of age, y'know. I say, this is cozy. Wouldn't mind it m'self...."

I spread a tablecloth, admittedly a somewhat rare event. "What are you doing in town anyway?" I said. "Last place I'd expect to see you."

"Oh, this and that," he said vaguely. "Browsing. Never could resist junk shops; still looking for that undis-

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covered Raphael."

I let the crack about junk shops pass. It was ninety percent right anyway. I opened the wine instead, poured a couple of glasses. I said, "It's good to see you, Colin," and he beamed again. "Me, too," he said. "It's good to see *you*." For once, he sounded almost as if he meant it.

We sat and nattered, far longer, in fact, than two hours. I told him, briefly, what had happened to me, the cockup I'd made of my life. He listened, lips pursed and nodding, but made no comment. Instead, he sketched in some of the things he'd been getting up to in the past few years; and pretty amazing stuff it was, though I've no room to set it down here. After which I boiled up some coffee, hunted out a couple of cigars. We sat and reminisced about old times in general, till suddenly he looked down at his wrist. "Have to break it up I'm afraid, old chap," he said. "Early start tomorrow, long day...."

"Can I get you a cab?" I said. "It's not the best area for walking after dark, you know."

"Wouldn't hear of it," he said cheerfully. "Taxi stand just round the corner, be there in a jiff." He skipped through the front door; but halfway down the steps he turned. "I say, do you plan on watching Wimbledon?"

"Try and keep me away," I said. "I take half-days off for the fortnight. Why?"

He grinned. "Good. Should be rather interesting this year. Main reason I've come up, in fact. Well, cheerio; and I'll be in touch. Mustn't let another quarter century slip by...."

I closed the door thoughtfully. I was wondering what the devil he could have meant. One fact was certain: there was something behind it. Because I'd never yet known him say a thing without a reason.

The Wimbledon of that year promised to be the best on record. There were the usual gripes about the seedings and the price of strawberries, the usual gloomy prognostications as to the weather; but that's all part of the fun of the thing, and expected. Not unnaturally, though, the chief topic of conversation among the pundits was Miss Sarah Foster. Had she found her form at last? And could she, this time, keep her game together? How would she fare against Chris Walewski, to whom she'd lost decisively in their last half dozen meetings? Always assuming, of course, she stayed alive that long. Nobody, I noticed, pondered the outcome of a match between her and the great Anna Schroeder, now in contention for her fifth singles title; by which I assumed the general consensus was that she wouldn't.

In any event, the tournament opened under skies of burning blue, a state of affairs the forecasters assured us cheerfully would last throughout the fortnight. Din Mahommed, reigning men's champion, defended his title with customary vigor; Anna, in her

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mandatory opening match, gave a classically cool display against a little Netherlander who seemed too overawed by the occasion to put up much resistence. The lobs fell with merciless accuracy, each within inches of the line; and I found myself shaking my head. I, too, were I to be honest with myself, gave Sarah little chance.

However, she survived, battling on gamely in her own section, though not without a few heartstopping moments. The crowds, of course, were with her to a man, or woman; for my part, stupid though it will undoubtedly sound, I sat for much of the time with her framed letter on my knee, pressing my palm to the glass as if I could somehow transmit a strength to her. Maybe it helped, I wouldn't know; I'm sure Col Lowston would say stranger things have happened.

The tournament proceeded smoothly enough till the end of the first week, which found Walewski giving a particularly vitriolic display for the benefit of a game young American. As usual, she had brought a small but vociferous band of supporters with her; the cushions were raining down, and the scorer booming about penalty points, when the commentator broke in excitedly. "And now we're leaving this for a moment and going over to No. 12 court, where I'm told something truly remarkable is happening...."

The image flickered and changed. For a moment it seemed they had trouble with the cameras, out in that distant precinct. Then the picture brightened; the tiny figures steadied, below me on the grass. The scoreboard told its own story: 0 - 6, 0 - 4. The server was Cirri Pütsjarvi.

Her first ball was a good one, fast and deep. It was answered, leaving her no chance. So were the second and third balls. The fourth she got her racket to, in a desperate attempt to lob, but to no avail; *out* was called, leaving her opponent serving for the match. Her first ball aced the Finn, streaking down the center line to rebound from the screening with a wicked thump. The canvas shook from side to side, and I blinked. Never could I remember seeing a ball hit as hard as that; and certainly not by a woman. The second Cirri returned, by the merest reflex action. It flew high and wide, and would almost certainly have gone out; but her opponent, already at the net, dispatched it anyway with a viperish cross-court volley. Two more unplayable aces followed, and it was all over. "And so," babbled the commentator, "the number three seed goes out, in love sets, to a complete unknown. Well, what a turnup; what a turnup for the book...."

I wasn't listening. My back felt icy, and the room was evincing a strong tendency to rotate. For the cameras had zoomed in, first to show Cirri's stricken face, then to focus on the stranger. She turned, smiling, reached up formally to touch the referee's

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hand. For a moment, it seemed her eyes looked straight into mine; and in that second I knew her. Hers was a face I hadn't seen for more years than I cared to remember; but equally it was one I could never forget. Because the last time it stared at me, it had been from the heart of a computer.

She was grabbed for interviews, of course, within minutes; it was no surprise to see Col Lowston with her, fussing about like a mother hen. It was only then that I realized what a striking woman she was: tall and graceful, with delicately modeled legs. No hint of that stringiness that sometimes afflicts even the best of women athletes. She had poise, too, and a rare elegance: not a hair out of place, and as composed as if she'd just come in from a gentle stroll, rather than off that burning-hot court. I put her age at twenty-one or -two, but with that face, it was almost impossible to tell. She could have been — but heaven knows, really, what she could have been.

The interviewer riffled a sheaf of papers. "Tell me, Miss Cagnac, your ... er ... first name. How do you...."

"The aitch mutes the consonant before it," she said, smiling. "Just as in English."

He looked, if possible, more unsure than ever. "Well, er ... yes. Miss Cagnac, that was a truly remarkable performance, truly remarkable. And of course, a quarterfinal qualifier; which means you'll be meeting...."

"Walewski, without a doubt," said Col. He seemed to be relishing the situation.

"Er ... yes," said the interviewer. "Yes, it's coming through on this funny little earpiece thing ... Yes, she's through. So that really should be quite a match...."

Miss Cagnac inclined her head graciously.

"Tell me — I'm not going to try that first name, I'm bound to get it wrong — tell me, how were you able to lift your play so radically? I mean, you've played extremely well to get so far; but this...." He seemed genuinely at a loss for words.

The other raised her chin. "Miss Pütsjavi is a very fine performer," she said. "I have great respect for her. One must always do one's best to win." She fixed him with her disturbing eyes; and he turned to Colin, it seemed in self-defense. "Dr. Lowston, I understand Miss Cagnac is your protégé?"

"Very much so," said Colin, and grinned again. Everything, it seemed, was all right with his world.

"But who trained her? Where...."

"I did, I suppose," said Col. "Well, it was more of a team effort, really...."

The girl turned to give his wrist a little squeeze. "Whatever I am, I owe to him," she said. "He is always far too modest."

I frowned. Her voice was soft, with a hint of huskiness; but there was something in the intonation that I just

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couldn't place. Her first name, certainly, was Irish; her surname almost had a Breton ring; the accent belonged to neither. I decided I'd simply never heard it before.

Colin stood up briskly. "Well, I'm afraid Dearbhla must rest now, she's had a busy day. So if you'll excuse us, I'm sure you understand...."

"Thank you," said the interviewer. "Thank you, Miss Cagnac. And ... er ... good luck with the quarterfinals...."

Cirri was more forthright. "*Wow*, it come," she said. "Straight down the middle line. Think for a minute it knock ruddy hole in me. Wow...." She stuck her lip out, blew upward at her fringe, and rolled her eyes. "And she not even sweating...." Then, typically, she grinned. "Good luck anyway," she said. "She player, never seen like her before...."

In its own way it was a small enough remark; but it was enough to set the press baying on the scent. Most of the Monday papers carried screaming headlines. WIMBLEDON MYSTERY: THE GIRL WHO CAN'T PERSPIRE. IS SHE WHAT SHE SEEMS? It was obvious some valiant digging had been going on; somebody had even unearthed a tape of Colin's old program, though the studio videos themselves had not been retained. So I was never able to prove, to anybody else at least, what I had seen.

Colin himself was unavailable for comment. He has stolen a march on his pursuers; sometime during the evening following the match a helicopter landed on the roof pad of his hotel, whisking him and the girl off to an unknown destination. They had been accompanied, according to a reporter blessed either with unusually keen sight or an abnormally powerful imagination, by "half a dozen white-coated men, very obviously lab technicians." I guessed at some hand-wringing behind the urbane face of the All England Club; for the match was scheduled for two in the afternoon.

The arrival was made in style, the chopper swooping down to the accompaniment of cheers from the crowds that packed the approaches for a quarter mile around. From it, as chic and unruffled as ever, stepped the enigmatic Miss Cagnac, Colin bobbing delightedly at her side. Mounted police surged forward; others, hatless and sweating, linked their arms, leaned back on the crowds to force a passage to the ground. Newsmen scurried with their microphones and cameras, but all were disappointed. The gates banged shut, the fists of the mob resumed their rhythmic, muffled beating.

It had been timed to a hair. Dearbhla stepped onto court No. 2, where Walewski already stood scowling and tapping her foot, at exactly five to the hour. The toss was made, the knockup proceeded; "Two minutes, ladies," was called, and the protégé slipped off the light jacket she had worn. She was dressed as before in

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brilliant white, the stitching of the fillet round her brow the only spark of color. Play was ordered, Miss Walewski to serve; and a total hush descended.

It didn't last long; Chris had obviously decided a counterdemonstration was in order. Her first return, which seemed to me a good six inches out, was duly called as such; and a familiar squalling rose. The umpire, summoned from his haven of retreat, confirmed both line judge and referee; but Walewski was barely into her stride.

At 0 – 40, after penalties for abuse of the racket and audible obscenity, she condescended to play on. Dearbhla, who had kept her back squarely to the fracas, turned to face the court; a delicate lob raised chalk dust from the baseline, and it was first game to Miss Cagnac.

I watched, as puzzled as the rest. There was none of the pulverizing strength I'd seen a day or so before; instead, the gentle, accurate ground shots went on and on. Time after time the tall girl opened the court, sending her opponent skidding desperately from side to side, but the smash that should have killed the ball just never came; time after time, it was returned quietly into play. The unforced errors mounted, till belatedly the answer came. She had Walewski's measure, and she was toying with her.

I think the notion dawned on the Polish girl at one and the same time. Her eyes contracted with fury, but it was too late; she was already on the run. She turned and leaped, performing prodigies, contacting ball after ball that miraculously seemed to pitch just within her reach. Dark vees of sweat grew on her chest and back; the microphones picked up her gasps for breath, mixed with the hard, erratic thudding of the rackets.

I don't know whether you've ever heard a tendon snap. I have, just once, and wouldn't particularly want to again. It seemed the sound echoed across the court like a pistol shot; it was followed by a thin, high scream of agony. Then Walewski was rolling on the ground, clutching her leg, while Dearbhla sauntered to the chair to demand the point. "The noise she made distracted me," she said coolly.

I couldn't believe my eyes. The Pole shoved away the officials who ran to her, got to her feet, and staggered to the baseline. How she stood at all, I couldn't imagine; it was raw courage, and nothing else, that kept her going. Her opponent shaped to serve, and over floated the sort of lob you'd see in a Sunday park. So the dreadful game of pat-a-cake was to be prolonged.

The crowd was on its feet. I think I was probably shouting, too. Over the years, Walewski had taken every mean advantage. She'd been the scourge of ball boys, linesmen, referees, and players alike; in my eyes she'd brought a great event into disorder and disrepute. But she hadn't deserved what was being done to her; nobody de-

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served that. The loudspeakers were booming for quiet; but the game ground on regardless. Because one player couldn't hear the din, and the other didn't care.

A quick shot showed Col Lowston sitting back, expressionless; beside him Sarah was hiding her face. Dearbhla glanced across; and whether some signal passed between them, I couldn't say. But her shoulders came back at last, and over went the crashing aces that ended the whole sorry affair. The speakers pealed, faint in the din, for game, set, and match; and Chris Walewski, blood on her chin, dropped to her knees, bowed her forehead to the grass. I stamped across the room, slapped at the stop button of the VCR, and set it to erase.

Anna Schroeder's turn came just forty-eight hours later. Naturally there had been immense speculation about just what tactics the newcomer would employ against the great baseliner, but nobody second-guessed the event itself; she baselined. Anna tried everything she knew: drop shots and stopped volleys, ground strokes that dipped and swung like birds in flight, the flashing backhand pass that many reckoned to be virtually unplayable. The rallies stretched endlessly, forty, fifty strokes at a time; but always, finally, it was the American who was drawn to the net. Then, with mathematical precision, would come the lob; and each and every ball raised its puff of dust from the line. As the score inexorably mounted, the crowd fell curiously quiet; till finally Anna's clear, brittle little "Yep" announced before the speakers that the match was over.

An odd thing happened then. As if on impulse, Dearbhla dropped her racket, raced round the net into her opponent's court. The other flung her hair back, wiped tiredly at her eyes; and the tall girl gripped her shoulders, in a gesture of sympathy. I may be crazy, and very probably am, but it seemed to me that what was conveyed above all else was the notion of regret for the thing she had been called upon to do. The photographers ran forward, intent to catch the moment; and just before the applause started a solitary voice spoke somewhere. Some fluke of acoustics carried it to the microphones; it said *"Reprogrammed...."*

In the rush of extraordinary events, my little Sarah had been, it seemed, all but forgotten. It was not the case, though; the audience-measurement folk claimed later that more people watched the second semi-final than any other match in the tournament. Nell Patterson, the Australian all-rounder, had been slowed by a torn groin muscle; but the battle was still a dour one, the hardest, probably, of the English girl's career. I watched it with feelings about as mixed as they could be. On one hand stood the glittering prize toward which Sarah's whole life had been aimed; but on the other stood Dearbhla and the man I was coming to think of, slowly but surely, as her

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master. What they might hatch between them I had no idea; but the thought of it struck with a sudden chill.

Colin rang me a few minutes after the transmission ended. He sounded very much his old chirpy self. "Well," he said, "coming along on Friday to see Sarah win her pot? I've got a couple of spare tickets; we can do it in style."

I'd forgotten, of course, that he was a member as well; but then, he was a member of almost everything. "No thanks," I said slowly, "I don't think I will."

The phone clucked at me. "Don't be an ass, old man; bloody things are like gold dust. Why ever not?"

I said, "I think you know why not. Anyway, she doesn't stand a chance."

He considered. "Never lost until it's won, you know," he said. "Or something like that. In any case, she'll need all the support she can get."

I hesitated. Somehow to be near her, physically near, for the first time in my life — the thought had a certain giddying appeal. To be on hand, in case of — what? There was nothing I could do to influence affairs, one way or the other. "I'd never make it," I said. "Not if the crowds are anything like the other day."

" 'Course you will," he said briskly. "I'll send a car round for you. Better make it nineish, before things warm up too much; give us a chance for the odd preprandial, too."

I hesitated again. "Look, Colin," I said, "just one thing. I don't know what your game is, but if anything happens to that kid.... Watch yourself, won't you? Because I'll not be answerable...."

He chuckled. "I've told you what's going to happen," he said. "See you in the morning." There was a click, and a buzz of a disconnected line.

I'd never been inside Centre Court before. Somehow the place seemed at the same time both more intimate and more massive that I had envisaged. Tri-Vee, for all its good points, gave you some funny notions of proportion and perspective. What it could never have conveyed, though, not in a million years, was the sheer electric tension of the place: an almost tangible buzz that set the adrenlin to flowing, the heart to pumping just that fraction faster than normal. I was regretting now the sour view I'd once taken of the players. I was a mere spectator; what I was feeling was a shadow of what they must go through, down there on the worn oblong of grass.

I looked across to the scoreboard, peered past the stand roof at the brilliant wedge of sky. Puffy white clouds were chasing themselves across my angle of vision. A bird swooped, sudden, and was gone; I was reminded for some reason of the acres of empty courts surrounding us. The whole great festival had closed in on itself, focused for this one day on a nucleus. Then Colin touched my arm.

She was tinier than I'd imagined:

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daintier, and infinitely prettier. Applause for her thundered, filling the high space round me; I heard it dimly, as if coming from a distance. My attention was wholly engaged: with textures of hair and skin; brilliant line of the skirt across her thigh; her hands as they fiddled with the ribbon in her hair, adjusted a sock, a shoelace. Again, I was well served out; it was no more than I deserved, though, for trying to live with my head inside a box. I was stunned by what must appear a simple, banal truth that she, that all of this, was *real*.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd driven a car; it was hard to believe just how rusty I'd got. The roads, too — with their overpasses, underpasses, and multiple lanes — just weren't the roads I remembered. It was a relief when the gates of the estate finally swung into sight. I turned in past the lodges, drove till I could see the house. And some house it was too: new, low wings stretching out on either side of the Tudor frontage. Above were the great stacks with their twisted, latticed pots. A fountain played, centerpiece of an immaculate lawn; beyond was the first of the superb, jewel green courts. I saw the net was strung, as if a match was imminent.

Quite why I'd taken up Colin's invitation, I couldn't say; except that somehow or other the affair of Dearbhal Cagnac just had to be resolved. "Come down," was all he'd said. "I think you'll find it interesting...." And that was that. I hovered for a while; finally I knew there was no way I could ignore it. And so the car was hired; into the tank went the best part of a month's allowance.

It was two days after the fiasco of the final: 6 - 0, 6 - 0 to Sarah Foster, against a player who moved with the awkwardness and uncertainity of a wooden doll. The crowd, stunned at first, had finally grown restive; and match point was greeted not with the storm it should have caused, but with derisive cheers. The clockwork business of the presentation proceeded: the carpet was rolled out, the ball boys scurried into their lines, Sarah swung the great salver over her head one final time. I wasn't close enough to see her face too clearly, but I could guess at the expression it bore. Victorious she was, in no uncertain terms; but the triumph was hollow. She had been given a bye.

Colin met me at the door, in check shirt and casual slacks. His manner was as breezy as ever. "Glad you could make it, old chap," he said. "Come in, I'll show you round...." And show me round he did, through room after room crammed with pictures, antiques, *objets d'art*. I rapidly gave up trying to estimate the value; I hadn't brought a calculator with me.

Last stop was the music room, housed in one of the new wings and presided over by a massive eighteenth-

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century harpsichord. Aquarium tanks let into the walls displayed a collection of British pond life; interspersed with them were the speakers of a massive multichannel hi-fi. I stared round vaguely; but I wasn't really registering too well. "Colin," I said, "why did you want me here? What are you setting up now?"

"A meeting," he said, grinning. "I thought you might be interested. And here she is, too, by Jove: dead on cue." He nodded toward the glass wall that closed off one side of the place. Between the estate trees a small red car was approaching at high speed.

He met her on the veranda with its leaden statues, its tubs of trailing plants. "I don't think you've been properly introduced," he said. "John Cunningham, a very old friend of mine; Miss Sarah Foster...."

But she had scant time for me. "Where is she," she said. "*Where is she*...?" She'd even come dressed for tennis, and there were rackets in her arms. "You promised," she said. Colin began to speak again, and she yelled at him. "Will you fetch her? Or shall I find her myself...."

"There's no need," said a quiet voice behind us. "Good afternoon, Miss Foster...."

She stepped out from the house. Up close, she was more spectacular than ever: the golden skin, the golden hair and eyes. She wore shorts, and a casually knotted sun top. Her feet were bare, a chunky charm bracelet tinkled at her wrist; over the other arm she carried a woolen sweater. She made to speak, but Sarah cut her off. "I want to play tennis," she said. "and I want *him* to keep away. Him and his bloody little black box...."

Colin's grin became broader; he pulled his slacks pockets inside out. "Never use the things," he said. "Had to give them up. Doctor's orders...."

For a moment, I thought she would attack him. She turned away, swallowed, and pointed. "Come on," she said.

Dearbhla smiled. "I'm sorry," she said, "but I can't oblige you, Sarah." She slipped the cardigan from her arm. On her wrist was a neat white bandage. "I strained it this morning, at practice," she said. "I couldn't hold a racket if I tried."

There was silence that went on. Sarah stared from her to Colin, and back. Finally she walked up to her. "Who are you?" she said. "*What* are you? *Just tell me*...."

Dearbhla smiled. "Someone who gets nerves on finals day," she said. "You ought to know about things like that."

Colin rubbed his hands. "Well," he said. "It's rather muggy this afternoon. I suggest we all take some tea."

A table was brought to the veranda, and a tray with mounds of thin-cut bread. A Georgian pot steamed gently; and there were silver bowls heaped with strawberries and cream. Dearbhla sat gracefully. "I'll be mother," she

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said. She filled the cups, and passed them; she took a slice of bread, bisected it neatly with a knife. She ate it slowly, her eyes on Sarah's face. Then she picked up a spoon. "The strawberries are good this year," she said. "All homegrown, too."

Sarah's chair went over. She ran; and then there was the screech of car tires on gravel. Then the engine sound, revving far too high in first, fading among the trees that lined the drive.

I expect you've all heard car crashes on the Tri-Vee: all that tinkling and crumpling, in glamorous overlay. In real life, of course, they're not like that at all. The single, hollow *bonk* sounded as if a giant had struck a dustbin with a mallet, out there among the trees. Then there was silence; and the birds still sang. Dearbhla jerked round, stared; then she was up, and running. Colin followed, but she fast outdistanced him.

I sat with my hands on my knees. I raised them, flexed the fingers, placed them back. A fly landed, on the rim of the jug of milk; and I knew I wasn't going to be able to move.

I was still sitting when they came back. For a time, I couldn't raise my eyes above their knees. Finally I made myself look up.

She was shaking, from reaction; her hair across her eyes, a bright bruise on her cheek. Dearbhla supported her, one hand below her elbow; and I never want to be looked at like that again. "Thank you, Mr. Cunningham," she said. "Thank you for being so concerned...." The other turned her away then. "Come inside," she said. "You must rest, until the doctor is here."

I stayed where I was. A few minutes — or an hour — later, the harpsichord began to play. The Goldbergs. By then I understood a little better. He never wasted time; so two experiments had been running concurrently. We were the other, the white rats in his maze; his next book would be a treatise on psychology. It would cost him a little paper and ink; it had cost me Sarah.

I walked through. His reflection glowed beneath him, on the parquet floor. I stood awhile and listened, but he didn't turn. "You bastard, Colin," I said finally. "You prime bloody bastard." He did pause at that, hunched his shoulders a little. Then came the little rustlings of the stops; and he began, gently, the tinkling Variation Three. I walked out to the car and drove away: to London, and winters and summers, and a room with nothing in it.

And now I suppose I'm going to disappoint you. Within a few months, U.K. Synthetics merged with the Vogler Corporation of the U.S.A., then with Vancuyck-Coevorden of Amsterdam. And so the mighty InterNatMech was born. Ten years, and the first Synths began to strut; but the answer I needed so badly, that Sarah needed, was never made. Was she a Synthetic, come years before her time? Or just some stray goddess of the courts? Either way, her time of glory

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was brief; because Dearbhla Cagnac was never heard of again. Though that was hardly my concern. I vacuumed my carpet, and laundered my sheets, and tried to think of nothing at all.

It was about a year later that I was roused, early one morning, by a hammering at the door. "Mr. Cunningham ... Mr. Cunningham.... Important visitor to see you!" The voice, the rising squeak at the end of each phrase, was unmistakable; it was the West Indian lass who lived two doors along. I slung a dressing gown on, and opened up.

I was still hazy with sleep; it took a moment for realization to dawn. Finally I said, "Hello, Sarah," and she said, "Can I come in?"

She was pale, her eyes dark-shadowed. She said, "I've got some bad news for you," and I nodded. I said, "It's your mother, isn't it," and she sat down on the edge of the bed. "Yes," she said. "It was very quick." She took a handkerchief out, sat staring at it. I hesitated, looking at my hands. Finally I reached to touch her shoulder. She stiffened; then she flung herself into my arms.

After the storm was over, and she'd washed her face at the handbasin, she said, "I'm sorry. I swore I wasn't going to do that."

"It's all right," I said. "Come and sit down again. I'll make some tea."

She touched her nose with the hankie. "She wasn't a bad woman," Sarah said. "She could have ... got rid of me. After she went away. But she didn't...."

"My dear," I said, "I never called her bad. I never stopped loving her, either."

"No," she said, "I can see that now." She smiled wanly, touched her lashes with a finger. God, Sarah was so like her when she did that. "I was so angry with you," she said. "So angry...."

"Sarah," I said, "she was never really mine. So you weren't, either. There was nothing I could do."

"It's all right," she said. "I understand that, too. I think I'd have been the same." She straightened. "John," she said, "you're coming back with me."

"No," I said. "No, Sarah, it wouldn't be right. Not Dorset."

She swallowed. "It's a damned great house," she said. "I'm not rattling in it on my own. You don't belong here; and I'm not losing you both." She stood up. "I'll come for you tomorrow," she said. "Be ready...."

I sat on the bed a long time after she'd gone. Then I started to write this down. Because the things inside me had to be given expression; and because the trees across the street were greener, greener than they'd been in years. And the last thing I remember is the last thing that she said; standing hand on the doorcatch, with those troubled sea blue eyes. "Did it matter?" she said. "Did it *really* matter?"

It mattered a lot at one time, Sarah. But not anymore; not ever anymore....

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From the author of THE BOOK OF THE NEW SUN, a superior new story.

A Cabin on the Coast

BY
GENE WOLFE

It might have been a child's drawing of a ship. He blinked, and blinked again. There were masts and sails, surely. One stack, perhaps another. If the ship were really there at all. He went back to his father's beach cottage, climbed the five wooden steps, wiped his feet on the coco mat.

Lissy was still in bed, but awake, sitting up now. It must have been the squeaking of the steps, he thought. Aloud he said, "Sleep good?"

He crossed the room and kissed her. She caressed him and said, "You shouldn't go swimming without a suit, dear wonderful swimmer. How was the Pacific?"

"Peaceful. Cold. It's too early for people to be up, and there's nobody within a mile of here anyway."

"Get into bed, then. How about the fish?"

"Salt water makes the sheets sticky. The fish have seen them before." He went to the corner, where a showerhead poked from the wall. The beach cottage — Lissy called it a cabin — had running water of the sometimes and rusty variety.

"They might bite 'em off. Sharks, you know. Little ones."

"Castrating woman." The shower coughed, doused him with icy spray, coughed again.

"You look worried."

"No."

"Is it your dad?"

He shook his head, then thrust it under the spray, fingering combing his dark curly hair.

"You think he'll come out here? Today?"

He withdrew, considering. "If he's back from Washington, and he knows we're here."

"But he couldn't know, could he?"

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He turned off the shower and grabbed a towel, already damp and a trifle sandy. "I don't see how."

"Only he might guess." Lissy was no longer smiling. "Where else could we go? Hey, what did we do with my underwear?"

"Your place. Your folks'. Any motel."

She swung long golden legs out of bed, still holding the sheet across her lap. Her breasts were nearly perfect hemispheres, except for the tender protrusions of their pink nipples. He decided he had never seen breasts like that. He sat down on the bed beside her. "I love you very much," he said. "You know that?"

It made her smile again. "Does that mean you're coming back to bed?"

"If you want me to."

"I want a swimming lesson. What will people say if I tell them I came here and didn't go swimming?"

He grinned at her. "That it's that time of the month."

"You know what you are? You're filthy!" She pushed him. "Absolutely filthy! I'm going to bite your ears off." Tangled in the sheet, they fell off the bed together. "There they are!"

"There what are?"

"My bra and stuff. We must have kicked them under the bed. Where are our bags?"

"Still in the trunk. I never carried them in."

"Would you get mine? My swimsuit's in it."

"Sure," he said.

"And put on some pants!"

"My suit's in my bag, too." He found his trousers and got the keys to the Triumph. Outside the sun was higher, the chill of the fall morning nearly gone. He looked for the ship and saw it. Then it winked out like a star.

That evening they made a fire of driftwood and roasted the big greasy Italian sausages he had brought from town, making giant hot dogs by clamping them in French bread. He had brought red supermarket wine, too; they chilled it in the Pacific. "I never ate this much in my life," Lissy said.

"You haven't eaten anything yet."

"I know, but just looking at this sandwich would make me full if I wasn't so hungry." She bit off the end. "Cuff tough woof."

"What?"

"Castrating woman. That's what you called me this morning, Tim. Now *this* is a castrating woman."

"Don't talk with your mouth full."

"You sound like my mother. Give me some wine. You're hogging it."

He handed the bottle over. "It isn't bad, if you don't object to a complete lack of character."

"I sleep with you, don't I?"

"I have character, it's just all rotten."

"You said you wanted to get married."

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"Let's go. You can finish that thing in the car."

"You drank half the bottle. You're too high to drive."

"Bullshoot."

Lissy giggled. "You just said bullshoot. Now *that's* character!"

He stood up. "Come on, let's go. It's only five hundred miles to Reno. We can get married there in the morning."

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"If you are."

"Sit down."

"You were testing me," he said. "That's not fair, now is it?"

"You've been so worried all day. I wanted to see if it was about me — if you thought you'd made a terrible mistake."

"We've made a mistake," he said. "I was trying to fix it just now."

"You think your dad is going to make it rough for you—"

"Us."

"—for us because it might hurt him in the next election."

He shook his head. "Not that. All right, maybe partly that. But he means it, too. You don't understand him."

"I've got a father myself."

"Not like mine. Ryan was almost grown up before he left Ireland. Taught by nuns and all that. Besides, I've got six older brothers and two sisters. You're the oldest kid. Ryan's probably at least fifteen years older than your folks."

"Is that really his name. Ryan Neal?"

"His full name is Timothy Ryan Neal, the same as mine. I'm Timothy, Jr. He used Ryan when he went into politics because there was another Tim Neal around then, and we've always called me Tim to get away from the Junior."

"I'm going to call him Tim again, like the nuns must have when he was young. Big Tim. You're Little Tim."

"O.K. with me. I don't know if Big Tim is going to like it."

Something was moving, it seemed, out where the sun had set. Something darker against the dark horizon.

"What made you Junior anyway? Usually it's the oldest boy."

"He didn't want it, and would never let Mother do it. But she wanted to, and I was born during the Democratic convention that year."

"He had to go, of course."

"Yeah, he had to go, Lissy. If you don't understand that, you don't understand politics at all. They hoped I'd hold off for a few days, and what the hell, Mother'd had eight with no problems. Anyway, he was used to it — he was the youngest of seven boys himself. So she got to call me what she wanted."

"But then she died." The words sounded thin and lonely against the pounding of the surf.

"Not because of that."

Lissy upended the wine bottle; he saw her throat pulse three times. "Will I die because of that, Little Tim?"

"I don't think so." He tried to think

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of something gracious and comforting. "If we decide we want children, that's the risk I have to take."

"*You* have to take? Bullshoot."

"That both of us have to take. Do you think it was easy for Ryan, raising nine kids by himself?"

"You love him, don't you?"

"Sure I love him. He's my father."

"And now you think you might be ruining things for him. For my sake."

"That's now why I want us to be married, Lissy."

She was staring into the flames; he was not certain she had even heard him. "Well, now I know why his pictures look so grim. So gaunt."

He stood up again. "If you're through eating ..."

"You want to go back to the cabin? You can screw me right here on the beach — there's nobody here but us."

"I didn't mean that."

"Then why go in there and look at the walls? Out here we've got the fire and the ocean. The moon ought to be up pretty soon."

"It would be warmer."

"With just that dinky little kerosene stove? I'd rather sit here by the fire. In a minute I'm going to send you off to get me some more wood. You can run up to the cabin and get a shirt, too, if you want to."

"I'm O.K."

"Traditional roles. Big Tim must have told you all about them. The woman has the babies and keeps the home fires burning. You're not going to end up looking like him, though, are you, Little Tim?"

"I suppose so. He used to look just like me."

"Really?"

He nodded. "He had his picture taken just after he got into politics. He was running for ward committeeman, and he had a poster made. We've still got the picture, and it looks like me with a high collar and a funny hat."

"She knew, didn't she?" Lissy said. For a moment he did not understand what she meant. "Now go and get some more wood. Only don't wear yourself out, because when you come back we're going to take care of that little thing that's bothering you, and we're going to spend the night on the beach."

When he came back she was asleep, but he woke her carrying her up to the beach cottage.

Next morning he woke up alone. He got up and showered and shaved, supposing that she had taken the car into town to get something for breakfast. He had filled the coffeepot and put it on before he looked out the shoreside window and saw the Triumph still waiting near the road.

There was nothing to be alarmed about, of course. She had awakened before he had and gone out for an early dip. He had done the same thing himself the morning before. The little patches of green cloth that were her

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bathing suit were hanging over the back of a rickety chair, but then they were still damp from last night. Who would want to put on a damp, clammy suit? She had gone in naked, just as he had.

He looked out the other window, wanting to see her splashing in the surf, waiting for him. The ship was there, closer now, rolling like a derelict. No smoke came from its clumsy funnel and no sails were set, but dark banners hung from its rigging. Then there was no ship, only wheeling gulls and the empty ocean. He called her name, but no one answered.

He put on his trunks and a jacket and went outside. A wind had smoothed the sand. The tide had come, obliterating their fire, reclaiming the driftwood he had gathered.

For two hours he walked up and down the beach, calling, telling himself there was nothing wrong. When he forced himself not to think of Lissy dead, he could only think of the headlines, the ninety seconds of ten o'clock news, how Ryan would look, how Pat — all his brothers — would look at him. And when he turned his mind from that, Lissy was dead again, her pale hair snarled with kelp as she rolled in the surf, green crabs feeding from her arms.

He got into the Triumph and drove to town. In the little brick station he sat beside the desk of a fat cop and told his story.

The fat cop said, "Kid, I can see why you want us to keep it quiet."

Tim said nothing. There was a paperweight on the desk — a baseball of white glass.

"You probably think we're out to get you, but we're not. Tomorrow we'll put out a missing persons report, but we don't have to say anything about you or the senator in it, and we won't."

"Tomorrow?"

"We got to wait twenty-four hours, in case she should show up. That's the law. But kid—" The fat cop glanced at his notes.

"Tim."

"Right. Tim. She ain't going to show up. You got to get yourself used to that."

"She could be ..." Without wanting to, he let it trail away.

"Where? You think she snuck off and went home? She could walk out to the road and hitch, but you say her stuff's still there. Kidnapped? Nobody could have pulled her out of bed without waking you up. Did you kill her?"

"No!" Tears he could not hold back were streaming down his cheeks.

"Right. I've talked to you and I don't think you did. But you're the only one that could have. If her body washes up, we'll have to look into that."

Tim's hands tightened on the wooden arms of the chair. The fat cop pushed a box of tissues across the desk.

"Unless it washes up, though, it's just a missing person, O.K.? But she's

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dead, kid, and you're going to have to get used to it. Let me tell you what happened." He cleared his throat.

"She got up while you were still asleep, probably about when it started to get light. She did just what you thought she did — went out for a nice refreshing swim before you woke up. She went out too far, and probably she got a cramp. The ocean's cold as hell now. Maybe she yelled, but if she did she was too far out, and the waves covered it up. People think drowners holler like fire sirens, but they don't — they don't have that much air. Sometimes they don't make any noise at all."

Tim stared at the gleaming paperweight.

"The current here runs along the coast — you probably know that. Nobody ought to go swimming without somebody around, but sometimes it seems like everybody does it. We lose a dozen or so a year. In maybe four or five cases we find them. That's all."

The beach cottage looked abandoned when he returned. He parked the Triumph and went inside and found the stove still burning, his coffee perked to tar. He took the pot outside, dumped the coffee, scrubbed the pot with beach sand and rinsed it with salt water. The ship, which had been invisible through the window of the cottage, was almost plain when he stood waist-deep. He heaved the coffeepot back to the shore and swam out some distance, but when he straightened up in the water, the ship was gone.

Back inside he made fresh coffee and packed Lissy's things in her suitcase. When that was done, he drove into town again. Ryan was still in Washington, but Tim told his secretary where he was. "Just in case anybody reports me missing," he said.

She laughed. "It must be pretty cold for swimming."

"I like it," he told her. "I want to have at least one more long swim."

"All right, Tim. When he calls, I'll let him know. Have a good time."

"Wish me luck," he said, and hung up. He got a hamburger and more coffee at a Jack-in-the-Box and went back to the cottage and walked a long way along the beach.

He had intended to sleep that night, but he did not. From time to time he got up and looked out the window at the ship, sometimes visible by moonlight, sometimes only a dark presence in the lower night sky. When the first light of dawn came, he put on his trunks and went into the water.

For a mile or more, as well as he could estimate the distance, he could not see it. Then it was abruptly close, the long oars like the legs of a water spider, the funnel belching sparks against the still-dim sky, sparks that seemed to become new stars.

He swam faster then, knowing that if the ship vanished he would turn back and save himself, knowing, too, that if it only retreated before him, retreated

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forever, he would drown. It disappeared behind a cobalt wave, reappeared. He sprinted and grasped at the sea-slick shaft of an oar, and it was like touching a living being. Quite suddenly he stood on the deck, with no memory of how he came there.

Bare feet pattered on the planks, but he saw no crew. A dark flag lettered with strange script flapped aft, and some vague recollection of a tour of a naval ship with his father years before made him touch his forehead. There was a sound that might have been laughter or many other things. The captain's chair would be aft, too, he thought. He went there, bracing himself against the wild roll, and found a door.

Inside, something black crouched upon a dais. "I've come for Lissy," Tim said.

There was no reply, but a question hung in the air. He answered it almost without intending to. "I'm Timothy Ryan Neal, and I've come for Lissy. Give her back to me."

A light, it seemed, dissolved the blackness. Cross-legged on the dais, a slender man in tweeds sucked at a long clay pipe. "It's Irish, are ye?" he asked.

"American," Tim said.

"With such a name? I don't believe ye. Where's yer feathers?"

"I want her back," Tim said again.

"An' if ye don't get her?"

"Then I'll tear this ship apart. You'll have to kill me or take me, too."

"Spoken like a true son of the ould sod," said the man in tweeds. He scratched a kitchen match on the sole of his boot and lit his pipe. "Sit down, will ye? I don't fancy lookin' up like that. It hurts me neck. Sit down, and 'tis possible we can strike an agreement."

"This is crazy," Tim said. "The whole thing is crazy."

"It is that," the man in tweeds replied. "An' there's much, much more comin'. Ye'd best brace for it, Tim me lad. Now sit down."

There was a stout wooden chair behind Tim where the door had been. He sat. "Are you about to tell me you're a leprechaun? I warn you, I won't believe it."

"Me? One o' them scamperin', thievin', cobblin' little misers? I'd shoot meself. Me name's Daniel O'Donoghue, King o' Connaught. Do ye believe that, now?"

"No," Tim said.

"What would ye believe, then?"

"That this is — some way, somehow — what people call a saucer. That you and your crew are from a planet of another sun."

Daniel laughed. "'Tis a close encounter you're havin', is it? Would ye like to see me as a tiny green man wi' horns like a snail's? I can do that, too."

"Don't bother."

"All right, I won't, though 'tis a good shape. A man can take it and be whatever he wants, one o' the People o' Peace or a bit o' a man from Mars.

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I've used it for both, and there's nothin' better."

"You took Lissy," Tim said.

"And how would ye be knowin' that?"

"I thought she'd drowned."

"Did ye now?"

"And that this ship — or whatever it is — was just a sign, an omen. I talked to a policeman and he as good as told me, but I didn't really think about what he said until last night, when I was trying to sleep."

"Is it a dream yer havin'? Did ye ever think on that?"

"If it's a dream, it's still real," Tim said doggedly. "And anyway, I saw your ship when I was awake, yesterday and the day before."

"Or yer dreamin' now ye did. But go on wi' it."

"He said Lissy couldn't have been abducted because I was in the same bed, and that she'd gone out for a swim in the morning and drowned. But she could have been abducted, if she had gone out for the swim first. If someone had come for her with a boat. And she wouldn't have drowned, because she didn't swim good enough to drown. She was afraid of the water. We went in yesterday, and even with me there, she would hardly go in over her knees. So it was you."

"Yer right, ye know," Daniel said. He formed a little steeple of his fingers. "'Twas us."

Tim was recalling stories that had been read to him when he was a child. "Fairies steal babies, don't they? And brides. Is that why you do it? So we'll think that's who you are?"

"Bless ye, 'tis true," Daniel told him. "'Tis the Fair Folk we are. The jinn o' the desert, too, and the saucer riders ye say ye credit, and forty score more. Would ye be likin' to see me wi' me goatskin breeches and me panpipe?" He chuckled. "Have ye never wondered why we're so much alike the world over? Or thought that we don't always know just which shape's the best for a place, so the naiads and the dryads might as well be the ladies o' the Deeny Shee? Do ye know what the folk o' the Barb'ry Coast call the hell that's under their sea?"

Tim shook his head.

"Why, 'tis Domdaniel. I wonder why that is, now. Tim, ye say ye want this girl."

"That's right."

"An' ye say there'll be trouble and plenty for us if ye don't have her. But let me tell ye now that if ye don't get her, wi' our blessin' to boot, ye'll drown — hold your tongue, can't ye, for 'tis worse than that — if ye don't get her wi' our blessin', 'twill be seen that ye were drownin' now. Do ye take me meaning?"

"I think so. Close enough."

"Ah, that's good, that is. Now here's me offer. Do ye remember how things stood before we took her?"

"Of course."

"They'll stand so again, if ye but do what I tell ye. 'Tis yerself that will re-

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member, Tim Neal, but she'll remember nothin'. An' the truth of it is, there'll be nothin' to remember, for it'll all be gone, every stick of it. This policeman ye spoke wi', for instance. Ye've me word that ye will not have done it."

"What do I have to do?" Tim asked.

"Service. Serve us. Do whatever we ask of ye. We'd sooner have a broth of a girl like yer Lissy than a great hulk of a lad like yerself, but then, too, we'd sooner be havin' one that's willin', for the unwillin' girls are everywhere — I don't doubt but ye've seen it yerself. A hundred years, that's all we ask of ye. 'Tis short enough, like Doyle's wife. Will ye do it?"

"And everything will be the same, at the end, as it was before you took Lissy?"

"Not everythin', I didn't say that. Ye'll remember, don't ye remember me sayin' so? But for her and all the country round, why 'twill be the same."

"All right," Tim said. "I'll do it."

"'Tis a brave lad ye are. Now I'll tell ye what I'll do. I said a hundred years, to which ye agreed—"

Tim nodded.

"—but I'll have no unwillin' hands about me boat, nor no ungrateful ones neither. I'll make it twenty. How's that? Sure and I couldn't say fairer, could I?"

Daniel's figure was beginning to waver and fade; the image of the dark mass Tim had seen first hung about it like a cloud.

"Lay yerself on yer belly, for I must put me foot upon yer head. Then the deal's done."

The salt ocean was in his mouth and his eyes. His lungs burst for breath. He revolved in the blue chasm of water, tried to swim, at last exploded gasping into the air.

The king had said he would remember, but the years were fading already. Drudging, dancing, buying, spying, prying, waylaying, and betraying when he walked in the world of men. Serving something that he had never wholly understood. Sailing foggy seas that were sometimes of this earth. Floating among the constellations. The years and the slaps and the kicks were all fading, and with them (and he rejoiced in it) the days when he had begged.

He lifted an arm, trying to regain his old stroke, and found that he was very tired. Perhaps he had never really rested in all those years. Certainly, he could not recall resting. Where was he? He paddled listlessly, not knowing if he were swimming away from land, if he were in the center of an ocean. A wave elevated him, a long, slow swell of blue under the gray sky. A glory — the rising or perhaps the setting sun — shone to his right. He swam toward it, caught sight of a low coast.

He crawled onto the sand and lay there for a time, his back struck by

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drops of spray like rain. Near his eyes, the beach seemed nearly black. There were bits of charcoal, fragments of half-burned wood. He raised his head, pushing away the earth, and saw an empty bottle of greenish glass nearly buried in the wet sand.

When he was able at last to rise, his limbs were stiff and cold. The dawn-light had become daylight, but there was no warmth in it. The beach cottage stood only about a hundred yards away, one window golden with sunshine that had entered from the other side, the walls in shadow. The red Triumph gleamed beside the road.

At the top of a small dune he turned and looked back out to sea. A black freighter with a red and white stack was visible a mile or two out, but it was only a freighter. For a moment he felt a kind of regret, a longing for a part of his life that he had hated but that was now gone forever. I will never be able to tell her what happened, he thought. And then: Yes, I will, if only I let her think I'm just making it up. And then: No wonder so many people tell so many stories. Good-bye to all that.

The step creaked under his weight, and he wiped the sand from his feet on the coco mat. Lissy was in bed. When she heard the door open she sat up, then drew up the sheet to cover her breasts.

"Big Tim," she said. "You did come. Tim and I were hoping you would."

When he did not answer, she added, "He's out having a swim, I think. He should be around in a minute."

And when he still said nothing: "We're — Tim and I — we're going to be married."

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Gregory Frost wrote "A Day in the Life of Justin Argento Morrel" (July 1983). Here he offers something completely different, a contemporary horror story....

Rubbish

BY

GREGORY FROST

Phil Rizuti had disappeared.

Watching the police walk past his townhouse to the one next door, Cal Thigpen lowered his No. 3 flat from the canvas and stared out his sliding glass doors. He had the A/C off, one door open, and could hear them knock on Rizuti's door.

A moment later there came the sound of a door opening, followed by the voice of Carol Rizuti, but quavery and hysterically high. Only bits of the conversation at the door drifted to Thigpen inside what had been intended as his dining room. He put the brush in a tomato soup can full of turpentine, lifted one of the crimped-paint-tube-littered folding trays out of the way, and opened the screen.

Thigpen had known Carol and Phil for almost three years, nearly as long as his stay here. They alone among all the tenants in this block of townhouses had befriended the painter upon his arrival. He saw them socially maybe twice a month at most, but still considered them true friends. Phil worked for the police department in Internal Affairs; even so, Carol had once confessed to Thigpen that she feared the "official visit" like any other cop's wife.

Before the two "uniforms" had gotten inside, he reached the doorstep and caught Carol's attention. She was a short brunette who always meant to exercise but never seemed to find the time — a little soft, but not so fat as to be unattractive. He saw the obvious worry in her blue eyes.

"What's the trouble, Carol?" he asked.

The two officers glanced back at him. He got the idea they wanted him gone right now. Later he could come back, but at the moment he was screw-

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ing up their business.

Rather than cause trouble, Thigpen let Carol know that he would be around later if she wanted him, then went back inside his own place.

He sat again before his easel, stared at the three-foot-square canvas, but could not think of what he wanted to do with the half-finished painting just now. He still had some late-afternoon light, enough to work with, but had lost the intensity that accompanied his work. The cops had interrupted him, broken the flow by stepping between him and his vision.

It was just as well. Within half an hour one of the cops had stopped outside his screen and asked to come in. The young man, looking freshly poured out of an Aqua Velva commercial, gave his painting a once-over, then scanned the others that hung on the walls or stood in stacks around the room. Thigpen got the feeling the cop actually appreciated some of the abstracts, but he said nothing about them. He returned his attention to Thigpen with a half-smile.

"You know Phil Rizuti and his wife?"

"Yeah, a few years. Something happen to him?"

"We're not sure yet. He's disappeared, according to his wife. I noticed you're situated in a position to notice who comes and goes along this walk."

"Yeah, if I pay attention."

"When was the last time you saw Mr. Rizuti?"

"About four."

"Coming in or going out, Mr. —"

"Thigpen comma Calvin. Coming in. On schedule. He normally arrives about that time every day, Monday through Friday. You're telling me that he isn't there now?"

"That's right." He looked at a little notebook in his hand. "But you didn't see him leave."

"Nope."

"And you were sitting here painting."

"That's right. I use this room for the light. Wouldn't have moved in here without it, as a matter of fact. But, uh" — he gestured at the two folding trays, one of which held an empty plate and a glass — "I got up and made a sandwich at one point, although that would have been before four o'clock. And I went to the bathroom at one point."

"When?"

Thigpen shrugged. "I don't check my watch when I go. Maybe an hour ago, but if you're trying to narrow down the time he went out, that doesn't necessarily mean anything. See, when I'm in the middle of something and the canvas is opening up for me, I tend to erase the rest of the world. It just goes away. He could have danced bare-assed in front of the window at some point and I never would have noticed, unless he blocked the light. Then I would have seen his shadow. Other than that, I'd never know. I mean, I didn't even notice when Carol got home. You see what I'm saying?"

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The young officer closed the notebook with a sigh and put it in his hip pocket. "O.K. Um, if anyone else needs to talk to you—"

"This is where I'll be from one to six seven days a week."

The young man noted that and went back out the screen, but peeked in before closing it and said, "I like the balance in that one." He pointed to the unframed painting Thigpen had on the wall behind the easel — one of blues and greens evoking a rainfall deep within some Smoky Mountain forest.

"Me, too," said the artist.

As the cop closed the sliding door, there came a knock at the front door. Thigpen went to it, half-expecting to find Carol there; instead, he opened the door on the complex's maintenance man, an old Oriental gentleman with whom Thigpen had had very few dealings over the past four years.

"You got toilet problem?" asked the maintenance man, whose shirt had the name "Chuck" emblazoned on the pocket in red thread.

"Was I supposed to have?"

"Chuck" looked exasperated. "Places at other end of row have flooding in downstairs toilet. Maybe you, too."

Thigpen let him in and waited in the hall while the man checked out his commode. It took "Chuck" only a minute. "Nope," he said. "You water level down, but no flood." He made a "tchick" with his tongue. "Somepin' fouled up the sewer line, way down under the hill. Time for snake." He gave Thigpen a meaningless smile and left.

After closing the door, the painter went back to his easel, but the light had gone now, the very last of it being useless to him.

Cal Thigpen picked up his plate and glass and carried them into the kitchen. His stomach rumbled, wanting dinner. Another sandwich would not satisfy that hunger. He wished silently for the thousandth time that he had learned how to cook before Nan had divorced him. He decided to go out for a pizza.

For a moment he considered changing out of his paint-stained jeans and T-shirt, but the muggy Carolina heat coming through the screen made him exhausted just thinking about it. Let 'em smell paint. He grabbed his wallet and headed out.

She must have heard the slam of his front door. Before Thigpen had taken half a dozen steps along the sidewalk, her door opened, the knocker rattling, and she called to him to wait. He looked back at her and knew he could not leave without reassuring her.

Maybe he would *order* a pizza instead.

Carol had a glass of white wine in her hand. She asked him if he wanted a drink, too, and from her tone he understood that she needed him to drink with her. He let her fix a gin and tonic while he called in to have a pizza delivered. She sliced a fresh lime and

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polished off a bottle of tonic in making his drink. Thigpen watched her, marveling at her ability to assemble something as simple as a drink without making a mess — something he could never do. In fact, he was constantly amazed at how tidy she kept this overstocked and gadgeted kitchen. She opened the pantry door, put a new plastic trash bag in the trash container, and dropped the empty bottle and the heel of the lime into it. Then she mopped off the counter with a sponge and only then handed him his drink and led him from the kitchen.

Compared to the sparseness of his own apartment, the Rizutis lived in opulence. Carol was a decorator with very definite ideas. Paintings and prints lined the walls, most of them from the Metropolitan collection; Carol had even honored him by selecting and displaying one of his.

The living room couch was composed of four square beige blocks and two smaller, rectangular footstools arranged around a glass and silver coffee table. A huge bulb lamp hung over them like a microphone on the end of an arcing boom. The stereo system was not too big for the room and had been placed out of the way, carefully, among small glass-fronted bookcases. Phil and Carol Rizuti were, to Thigpen's mind, people born to apartment life. He, on the other hand, longed for a big old house with high ceilings and wooden floors: a place where he could work on huge canvases. Sometimes he could almost smell the oil paint wafting through the rooms.

"So tell me what's going on, Carol," Thigpen said. "Did Phil walk off with a kilo of Exhibit A?"

He had tried to keep it light, but Carol's expression became hard and tight, and she stared down into her wine. "He's gone," she replied, so softly that he nearly missed it. "He must have come home, because his clothes are upstairs — the suit he wore this morning, his shoes."

"He changed clothes."

"Right."

He waited, expecting her to continue. When she remained silent, he prompted her. "Then what?"

"Well, I don't know. He was gone at five when I got home. No note, no sign of him."

He understood then that the department had come out here at *her* insistence. He tried to control his voice, but it got away from him. "Carol, you called the cops after only *two* hours without Phil? What if the guy went to the store, fer Chrissake?"

She looked at him with a glint of anger. No doubt the police had treated her in much the same tone; normally, they would not have responded to a Missing Persons call for twenty-four hours, but Thigpen felt sure she knew someone who could pull strings for her, though surely with no less skepticism than he had. "He couldn't very well go the store," she said, "when he left behind his wallet, his checkbook,

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and the keys to both the apartment and the car."

Thigpen thought that over. "Was the house unlocked when you got home?"

"It was."

"Well, wherever he went, he meant to come back. There you are — maybe he's out jogging."

"Phil?" she asked incredulously.

"Yeah, O.K. Dumb idea." At forty, Phil looked like a man who had long ago given in to the sedentary life of the desk jockey. "Well, what about the pool, then? He might have gone swimming."

"He would have waited for me to get home, or left a note telling me to come on down to the clubhouse when I got in."

"True," he said, giving in to her. "I don't know a more conscientious man than Phil. Especially when it comes to you, dear." He smiled at her, but could find little reason to offer hope. Still, the fact that her husband had been missing for only two and a half hours made the whole matter seem utterly absurd, and he *knew* how Phil doted on Carol. The one thing that came into his head he kept to himself. It seemed impossible to consider and was certainly nothing to voice to a friend's wife; besides, he could not make himself believe for a minute that Phil Rizuti might be having an affair with someone in the complex. And even if by some outrageous circumstance that were possible, then Phil had the brains not to advertise it like this. No, Thigpen decided, out of the question. Incomprehensible. He sipped his drink in silence and studied his painting.

Someone knocked on the front door.

"That'll be my pizza," Thigpen said. He jumped up, saying, "I'll get it, stay put," and went down the hall, pulling wadded-up bills out of his wallet and hoping it would, in fact, not be his pizza, but rather Rizuti instead.

It was neither.

At the door stood a tall, wiry man with reddish hair going to gray and a face that had creased deeply with age. The skin under his chin had softened into two pleats. It was a face that Thigpen could have found interesting enough to paint. The man wore a dark suit that did not fit him quite right in the shoulders. After looking him over, the man said hopefully, "Phillip Rizuti?"

"Nope."

"Is he here?"

"Nope. Why?"

The man studied him all over again with a different look, of curiosity and formulation. He held up a wallet that was not a wallet — Thigpen saw that it was a black case containing a badge.

"I'm Lieutenant Painter," the man drawled.

"You're kidding."

"What's that s'posed to mean?" He had the accent of a natural-born Carolina boy.

"Nothing. You want to talk with Mrs. Rizuti?"

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"Who are you?"

"Nobody. I mean, my name's Cal Thigpen. I live next door."

"Oh, yeah. One of the boys interviewed you earlier. Didn't have much to say. You're the painter." The explanation of Thigpen's earlier remark overtook him quite suddenly. For a second his eyes crinkled.

"Something new turn up?"

"Wal, I was hoping not. But maybe, since you say Mr. Rizuti isn't back yet."

"What's going on?"

Both men turned and saw Carol Rizuti at the end of the hallway. Cal Thigpen stepped out of the way and let the lieutenant enter. The policeman explained who he was again, then explained as delicately as he could that there had been a traffic accident with an unidentified male in it who might be Phil Rizuti, but they would like a positive ID from her. She made him repeat that the man was dead.

"Wait a minute," Thigpen interjected. "The guy's from your office, fer Chrissake. Surely somebody down there could give you the ID, couldn't they?"

"They all went home hours ago. Internal works reg'lar hours, Mr. Thigpen," Painter explained. "Mrs. Rizuti?"

Shaken and pale, Carol Rizuti agreed to go see the body. She went upstairs to get her things.

While she was gone, there was a second knock on the door. Thigpen's pizza had arrived. He paid the delivery girl and set the pizza on the dining room table. The smell of it nearly drove him crazy, but the idea of eating at this time struck him as blasphemous.

"You always get your food delivered here?" asked Painter.

"Who's going to answer my door if I have it sent over there? Or is there supposed to be more meaning in that question?"

"No, just wondering."

"Sure you were."

Painter scanned the kitchen briefly, then clucked his tongue. "My, my, if she doesn't have one of everything in there. Bet she makes her own ketchup." He stared sternly at Thigpen. "I was just amazed that anyone would be eating at a time like this."

Thigpen felt himself getting hot. With great control, he kept his voice level. "Dammit, the guy has only been gone about three hours."

Painter nodded, one corner of his mouth turned up in what might have been the hint of a smile. "I know." He reached into his inside suit pocket, removed a pair of heavy black-frame glasses, which he put on with one hand while scooping up a stack of unopened mail from the dining room table. He noted the return addresses on each and that each was postmarked. Thigpen watched him with growing annoyance, but kept silent, supposing that this was part of the job. He listened to Carol moving around upstairs.

She came back down carrying her

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purse and car keys. She had put on makeup and brushed her hair. That seemed incongruous to Thigpen at first, but he realized that shock might actually make people like Carol more meticulous than normal. It was her defense.

She turned to him before leaving. "Please stay until I get back. He might call or ..."

"Sure, Carol." He patted her arm. "I'll just nibble on the pizza and watch TV or something."

Left alone, Cal Thigpen went over to the dining room table and considered the flat cardboard box that dared him to confront the treasures hidden within. He still thought it improper to eat, but knew better than to argue with his stomach. As he stood there, he found himself drawn to the same unopened mail Painter had looked at; with a slight flush of guilt, he started looking through it.

He left her some pizza, but she did not want any when she returned. He told her to keep it for later, when the shock wore off and she got hungry.

The body had not been Phillip Rizuti. And he had not checked back in since she had left.

Thigpen started to clean up, but she stopped him. "I don't feel like going to sleep just now," she told him. "I'll probably clean the house or something until I'm too tired to see straight. Then I'll go to bed. I don't want to take any pills. If he calls, I want to be awake."

"Sure. You know where I am if you need me. I'll be home all day tomorrow, too. I have Susanah coming for another book cover piece. We'll be at it all morning."

"Painting?"

He grinned. "Well, at least you haven't lost your sense of humor."

"Look, why don't you bring her over here for dinner tomorrow night."

"You going in to work tomorrow?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"O.K." He started to turn away, then paused and looked back at her. "Better still, why don't you come over for dinner. Phil would know to call you there."

She agreed, and he left her standing in her kitchen looking lost and empty. At least, he thought, Phil Rizuti was still alive. Theoretically.

"God, I *really* need a cigarette."

"I'm almost finished, Suse, just sit there a few more minutes, will you?"

He had her kneeling on one knee and holding up his fishing rod, which, in the final painting, would become a wicked trident. For the pastel sketch he was doing as a preliminary, it was a single straight line.

Susanah was his favorite model of all he had ever worked with. He figured once that he could have painted her body a thousand times and never gotten bored with it. That she already adorned well over a dozen paperbacks of various sorts only sub-

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stantiated this belief. Her dark blonde hair hung to the middle of her back. She had been a gymnast in high school and college, and her body remained remarkably firm from a daily regimen of exercises. Artists did not generally get involved with models who answered ads in the paper — the models usually had a private life of an entirely different sort already carved out — but Susanah and he had practically fallen in love before the first sketch had been completed.

"Please, Calvin, I'm goin' nuts," she begged.

"Smoking's bad for you."

"That kind of talk'll get you tarred and feathered in this state, honey."

"Think what you're doing to your body."

"What's wrong with my body?"

Exasperated, Thigpen set down the cray-pas stick and wiped his fingers on a rag. "All right. Five minutes. Smoke 'em if you got 'em."

Susanah stood up and flexed her legs, then walked boldly over to her purse.

"You know," mused Thigpen, "they can see you from across the road over there."

"Really?" She stood up with her cigarette dangling from between her lips. After lighting it, she placed both hands on her hips and took a defiant pose in front of the glass doors. "Let 'em drool." Then she saw the Chinese maintenance man at the bottom of the hill wrestling with what looked like a long metal tapeworm. She stepped back from the window, turned away, blowing smoke out of her nostrils. She took the cigarette out of her mouth and grinned at Thigpen. "Let me see what you've done."

He had placed her at the foot of a massive throne on which sat a lizard king — a figure he had borrowed from sketches done a year before for a romance novel. The area around her had been sketched to suggest strange creatures emerging from mist at the borders.

"Do I get this one when you're done?"

"As always," he answered. She pressed up against him, her arms snaking around his shoulders. Smoke curled out from behind his head. He pretended to cough. "Dear, you know the smell of your cigarette is enough to take the sex drive out of the most virile male."

"Cal," she said with a trace of annoyance.

"All right, all right. Your five minutes are up. Give yourself another puff and put it out."

"Oh, come on."

"I mean it. I want to get this done before Carol arrives." He had told Susanah about Phil Rizuti's strange disappearance. "I don't want her seeing all these naked women running around my place."

She pulled back his head. "What d'you mean, all these naked women? What others?" She glared down at him.

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"I was referring to you." He reached up and grabbed some of her hair and drew her face down to his.

When he released her she returned to her pose.

"The cigarette is not part of the setting — lizards don't smoke." He waited impatiently until she had stubbed it out in an ashtray. "Grand."

A half hour later he had finished the sketch and decided that they had enough time before dinner to disappear upstairs for a while.

Cal had the fire going in the grill out back and Susanah was making hamburgers in the kitchen. After satisfying himself that the coals would do just fine, Thigpen carried the plastic container of lighter fluid back inside.

"Did you see Carol?" Susanah asked over her shoulder.

He set the fluid down on the counter beside her pack of cigarettes and lighter. "No, I didn't. She may have taken a sleeping pill, after all. Now that you mention it, maybe I'd better go over and make sure she hasn't forgotten. It's not like she hasn't more than one thing on her mind."

"Mmm."

Thigpen went out through the sliding door. The townhouse next door was closed up, and he wondered as he reached the door if Carol had not perhaps fled from her trouble. This nagged him enough to step back on the sidewalk and look down at the cars parked in the lot beyond and down the hill from his own place. Carol's Toyota was there, right next to Phil's Colt.

Thigpen's neck tingled with apprehension. He went up to the Rizutis' front door and rapped with the knocker. The door yielded slightly: it had been ajar.

He stuck his head inside and called out, but received no answer. The place smelled as if it had been closed up all day, which was odd, because Carol would never have allowed mustiness if she were home. It went against her fundamental beliefs.

He left the door and wandered inside. The dining room table was bare; no trace remained of last night's pizza. He went down the hall to the living room and found it the same as it had been last night, save that the drink glasses were gone. Returning down the hall, he decided to go upstairs, still hopeful that she had simply conked out after a fitful night.

The bed was made and no one lay upon it. But Phil Rizuti's suit still lay at the foot, probably as he had left it. He could imagine Carol playing a sort of mental game that if everything remained the same, her husband would come walking back in normally, time truncating so that all the nasty business with the police and identifying corpses would never have occurred.

He checked the bathrooms and the guest bedroom. No one was there.

Back downstairs, he considered that she might have left a note for him

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on the bulletin board beside the phone and went into the kitchen to see.

The kitchen had been cleaned, too: dishes put away, all the parts of their drinks restored to cabinets. The closet door stood open. Inside it, he saw that the previous night's trash had been taken out — namely, his pizza box. Yes, that fit. She would not have been able to tolerate the idea of that smelly cardboard container sticking up out of the bag. Carol was, as he and Phil had joked on more than one occasion, a true anal retentive. Her world required immaculacy — which included being forever on time.

So, where the hell was she?

The little bulletin board revealed nothing. All the messages were to herself about shopping or future dinner engagements and the like. No not to him.

Flustered, he turned around to leave.

He screamed at the sight of the figure in the kitchen doorway. In that split second he recognized Lieutenant Painter, but he could not calm down that fast.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! Did you find that entertaining?"

"Cheapest thrill I know." The lieutenant stepped further into the room. "Might I ask what you're doing in this apartment *this* time?"

"Trying to find an explanation. Haven't had much luck."

"Explanation to what? Where's Mrs. Rizuti?"

"That's what I'd like to know."

The amusement vanished from the policeman's face as if it had never been there. Thigpen went on to tell him about the invitation to dinner and Carol's nonappearance at the appointed time. He told Painter what he had found in the rest of the house. "You didn't touch anything, I hope?" asked Painter.

"Nope. Just the front door. What is going on here?"

"Damned if I know."

"What did you come back for? Internal Affairs raising hell at his disappearance?"

Painter shook his head. "Nope, I was in the next block of apartments and decided I'd stop in to see if the lady's husband had turned up."

"The next block of apartments?"

"Yup," replied Painter, and Thigpen could see that the lieutenant did not want to explain himself, but Thigpen let Painter know that he would have to, and, reluctantly, the lieutenant added, "Someone else has disappeared."

"Jesus. Who?"

"Single male named Halliwell. Had a one-bedroom over in the next bunch of apartments, like I said. Hasn't been to work for the past two days. His office finally called the management here to have the place checked, thinking very wisely that their office manager might have had a heart attack or somethin' of the kind."

"And?"

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"That about wraps it up. The office sent somebody over to check. They went in, found nobody home and most of the lights on. Near as we can tell, everything was there. Makes no sense."

"Can there be a connection?"

"Seems like there oughta be. They didn't disappear at the same time, but it's pretty unusual as the crow flies. Did you know him — Halliwell?"

"Me? No, I didn't know him. Why would that make a difference? *I* haven't disappeared."

"You're about the only one here who hasn't." There was a malicious glint in his eye. "As of last night, too, I would bet fifty-fifty that you and Mrs. Rizuti had offed her hubby."

"You son of a bitch."

"Sorry. Comes with the territory."

"You're going to be around awhile, aren't you?" asked Thigpen.

"I will now. We're gonna have to go over this whole place."

"Then I want you to come next door with me. I want to introduce you to living proof why I wouldn't run off with Carol Rizuti."

They went back outside, but left the door open.

The sun had set behind the trees on the hill across the street. Painter directed a handful of people to the various tasks he wanted done in the Rizuti apartment.

Thigpen came over after a few minutes and found Painter sitting at the dining room table, filling out some form.

"How's your girlfriend?" the policeman asked without looking up.

"She's O.K."

"Sorry 'bout catching her like that. Never saw a woman exercise in the nude before."

"Yeah, well, I paint her in the nude, you see, so she generally doesn't bring a lot of clothes with her. And she's sort of spontaneous."

Painter looked at him then. "That's a better word for it than I could have thought up."

"How's it coming?" Thigpen indicated the others with his head.

"Nothing — which is about all I expected. Same's the other place. Won't take 'em more than a half hour here, though, 'cause everything's so tidy."

Thigpen scratched his head. "Look, um, for what it's worth, I was wondering if I could have a look at what's his name's place."

"Why? I thought you didn't know him."

"I don't. I just feel — well, it's stupid — but I feel involved. And maybe I'll see something that clicks, you know between the two apartments. Something I'm looking at here that should hold the answer for me, but doesn't."

"Oh, you got the feeling like the answer's here in front of you, but you can't see it?"

"No." Thigpen shrugged. "It was just a thought."

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"I s'pose it can't hurt." He stood, looking very tired. Then he went up to one of the other men and retrieved a key. As he led Thigpen out of the apartment, he said, "There's nothin' in the world I hate more'n a mystery."

"Yeah," Thigpen agreed, "I have a similar regard for a blank canvas."

Outside, a wind had come up, but the heat of the day had not lessened. In the north, distant thunder rumbled. A line of clouds stretched the length of that horizon, and both men knew that the storm would soon be here.

Thigpen stuck his head inside his apartment and called out to Susanah that he would be right back. "What about the burgers?" she yelled back. He promised he would throw on some more coals when he returned and cook by flashlight.

The two men went up the sidewalk, then turned right and headed across the hill to a block of apartments set on the next higher plateau and surrounded by oak trees swishing and hissing in the wind, leaves twisted upside down. Painter said nothing the whole walk. Thigpen wondered what he was thinking, but decided not to ask.

He had never been inside one of the apartments in the complex. Halliwell had been a fairly unkempt sort of person. His clothes lay strewn over half the apartment furniture, although a pressed suit still in its dry-cleaning bag hung over the back of the bedroom door.

The small kitchen reflected much the same life-style, with dishes stacked out of the sink and dollops of food on the counter tops. The pantry closet hung open, showing itself to be well stocked. The floor hid beneath an uneven layer of folded brown grocery bags, one of which carried a dark rectangular impression where another bag had apparently sat and leaked through onto it.

Thigpen went back into the combined living/dining room section and studied the debris throughout. The furniture looked cheap, but that was about the only conclusion he could draw.

Painter followed him from room to room, switching lights on and off, allowing him complete freedom. The policeman watched everything he did, still allowing for the slight possibility that Thigpen was the link between the disappearances. But when at last the artist sank down on the couch, the exasperation on his face declared his innocence and his total discouragement. "No luck, huh?" asked Painter.

"I don't know what I expected to find."

"Me, neither." Painter sat on the arm of the couch and looked the place over in silence for a time. Then he said, "Maybe you can still help, though, Thigpen. What do these places have in common with yours?"

Thigpen looked up. "What, you mean structurally?"

"Maybe. But I was thinkin' like what do they share?"

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After a moment, Thigpen started to list what he knew. "There's the parking lot — they park down the hill there, which is why that trail exists down to the sidewalk. Maybe they're supposed to park elsewhere, but *some* of them use it.

"And, uh, the mailbox up the street. That's for the whole complex. So is the pool and clubhouse."

"What's there?" the lieutenant asked, though he had already checked it out. No one at the pool had seen either Rizuti or Halliwell, neither of whom had been frequenters of the poolside social gathering. But he listened while Thigpen listed the sauna, weight room, Coke machine, Ping-Pong table, and shower stalls. "Presumably that goes for the women's side, too."

Having completed this inventory, Thigpen searched Painter's face for some positive feedback, but he could see immediately that he had added nothing new.

They went back to the townhouses in silent frustration. In the north, lightning flickered across the sky. Thigpen paused at his door to say, "I'll see you — let me know, will you?" to Painter, who nodded his assurances.

Susanah stood in the kitchen. She had just taken the bag of charcoal out of the pantry closet and handed it to him as he entered the room. "Here, and you better get them started quick, because it's gonna rain inside a half hour."

He stared down at the bag glumly, then finally turned around and grabbed the plastic container of lighter fluid and her lighter from the counter, absently, not even considering whether or not he needed them. "I'll come back for the burgers," he promised.

"O.K. I'm gonna take your garbage down before it climbs out of the closet. You know, you've got stuff in this bag I helped you eat two weeks ago? And the cans of turpentine — ech!"

"Yeah, well, it's a big bag, Suse." He walked on down the hall and out the back to the patio. Vaguely, he heard the front door slam.

The coals in the grill were shrunken to white-hot cores, way too hot for hamburgers. He used a pair of tongs to lift off the cooking grill, then started to layer in fresh coals. This completed, he replaced the grill and picked up the fluid bottle and lighter. He stopped. The answer rushed in unbidden, pushing all other thoughts from his mind.

He saw again the interiors of the two apartments: Halliwell's, with a big dark stain on the brown bag where another, a trash bag, had squatted; then Carol's kitchen, the pantry door open, the pizza box and bag gone from the rectangular plastic bucket that held her trash; and last, the same kitchen the night Phil had disappeared, as he watched Carol have to take out a new trash bag and fit it into the container. And, over this, Painter's voice: "What do they share?"

The trash bin, the huge green trash bin. He had forgotten that.

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Susanah!

Thigpen ran back outside, shouting her name but recalling the slam of the front door. The kitchen was empty, and he was already turning away. He shoved back the screen door and shouted her name into the deep twilight, then charged down the sidewalk. Behind him, someone called to him, but he did not pay attention. "Susanah!" he yelled again. She should have heard him, even above the wind. Why didn't she answer?

From the top of the steps he could see the three-sided fence enclosing the trash bin, enfolding it in complete shadow. The opening was on the opposite side — a sliding door at waist level — out of his view. He leaped the steps in two bounds, stumbled as he hit the bottom, scraping his knee, leaning his weight on the container in his hand — he still carried the fluid and lighter.

His ankle hurt as he rose up, but he ignored the pain and ran between the cars, across the lot. The bin rang with a deep boom, like a gong in a cavern.

She was doubled over the edge of the little door, and Thigpen saw her legs rising up from the ground and sliding into the filthy recesses inside the bin. Her bare feet thumped against the wooden fence once.

He made a weird sound in his throat and ran forward. Half-consciously he pried loose the cap of the fluid bottle with his thumb.

Her knees jerked over the rim. He grabbed her ankle and pulled as hard as he could. Susanah came halfway out of the trash container. Inside it, something growled in angry surprise — something inhuman. Thigpen had expected a rapist, a crazy killer; he was unprepared for this.

Feral eyes glowed out of the darkness. A huge webbed and taloned hand swung at him out of the opening. He jumped back, but fell against Susanah and the fence. The tip of one talon reached him, slit open his cheek.

He hastily aimed and squeezed the lighter fluid, spraying it at the glowing eyes. The thing in the trash bin howled. For an instant, lightning lit up the interior of the bin, and Thigpen glimpsed an erect serpentine body with sausagelike, sinewy arms. Still in darkness, the eyes seemed to flare, to mirror the threat of lightning.

He quickly grabbed hold of Susanah again and pulled her the rest of the way out. Blood coated her neck and shoulders. He prayed she was not dead as he dropped her in the grass beside the fence. A first drop of rain splashed in his eye. He leaned shakily for the fence and stumbled back on his bad ankle.

Something grabbed his hair, tugged sharply enough to jerk him off his feet. He slammed into the trash bin just below the little door. A second set of claws stretched down for his shoulder.

Thigpen flicked the lighter and held it at the arm over his head. The other leathery hand found his collarbone and grabbed hold. He spasmed as the

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talons pierced him. The thing stank of wet earth, a smell like worms.

"Thigpen!" someone shouted.

The lighter had gone out! He hurriedly adjusted the flame with his thumb, then sprayed fluid on the hand beside his face. With a sudden twist, he flicked the lighter and set the hand on fire.

The creature shrieked and released him. His shirt burst into a small circle of flame. He rolled over to put it out, nudged against the ground like a dog. His shoulder stung as if a nest of hornets had converged upon him. He could smell the singe on his hair.

Something smothered him and he fought it wildly until he realized it was a jacket. It stank of cigars. The jacket came away and Painter was kneeling over him. "I'm all right," he groaned, tried to say Susanah's name and failed.

Inside the trash bin the thing was screaming and thrashing hard enough to actually rock the whole bin.

Painter stood slowly, taking out his revolver. He looked in just as the thing — now a black shape wreathed in flames — dropped from sight. Painter leaned over the edge, ready to shoot, and saw the last of the thing kicking up dirt with hugely taloned feet as it scrambled back into a wide hole. The bottom plate of the trash bin had been removed, it seemed, though he could not be positive; too much burning debris blocked his view. He turned back toward Thigpen a moment before the turpentine in the artist's trash erupted with a "Whump!"

For a moment Painter leaned against the fence. Something spawned of nightmares had come up out of the earth; now, he hoped, Thigpen had sent it back there to die. Painter knew he would have to assemble a team to go into the sewers underneath this hill. His glance strayed out to the manhole cover in the middle of the street. How many? he wondered.

Thigpen had crawled over to Susanah. Under the smear of blood on her neck, there had been no wounds — the blood had run from her shoulders where the thing had picked her up. She was breathing rapidly, but steadily. He hugged her to him until Painter shook him out of his blind and thoughtless state. Rain was starting to fall. The trash bin, he could see, glowed red in places. The howling from inside it had stopped. He looked up at Painter and the sky and said, "I think we need a hospital."

He sat cradling Susanah as the downpour broke over them. Painter went to get a car.

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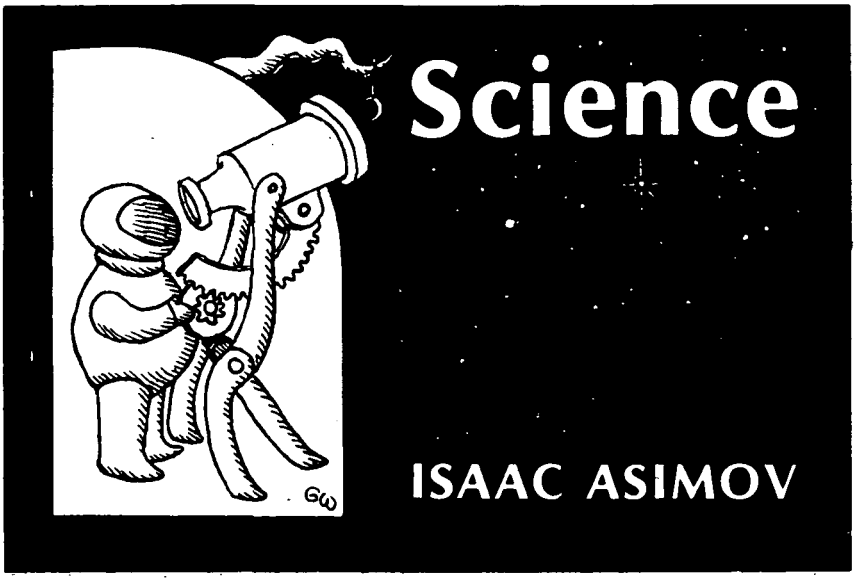

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

THE SUBATOMIC MONSTER

Every once in a while I am told I have "missed my calling." This, of course, is invariably said in good-natured mockery, usually when I have given a funny talk or sung a comic song. The idea, then, is that I ought to have been a stand-up comedian or a singer, perhaps.

I can't very well let the statement go unchallenged, and, by long experience, I have discovered that the most effective reply to the yell, "You missed your calling, Isaac," is —

"I know, my friend, but who wants a gray-haired old stud?"

Except that nothing is foolproof. I have used that squelch at least fifty times with the greatest success, and then a few days ago when I tried it, there came back the instant reply —

"A gray-haired old nymphomaniac!"

And with that, the tables were very neatly turned, and I had to wait quite a while for the laughs to stop. (My own included.)

But I haven't missed my calling, really, and everyone knows it. My calling is that of a writer, and that's what I am. In particular, my calling is that of an explainer, and *that's* what I am, too. So if you don't

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mind, I will now go about my calling.

For instance, how do you measure energy?

Well, work involves the expenditure of energy, and it is therefore energy in action, so to speak. One way of defining work is to say that it involves the overcoming of a resistance over some particular distance. You overcome the resistance by exerting a force.

For instance, Earth's gravitational pull tends to keep an object on the ground in place. To lift it, you have to exert a force to overcome the gravitational resistance.

The greater the weight of the object being lifted, the greater the force you must exert, and the more work you do. The greater the distance through which you lift the weight, the more work you do. Work then (and energy expended) is force times distance.

If you lift a weight of 1 pound through a distance of 1 foot you have done 1 "foot-pound" of work. (Notice that you put the distance first in this unit of work. There's no reason you couldn't put the weight first and call it 1 "pound-foot," but no one does that, and in all languages and cultures the explanation that "no one does that" is the most unanswerable stopper there is.)

If, then, you should happen to weigh 150 pounds and should climb a flight of stairs that raises you 8 feet; you have done 150 X 8, or 1200 foot-pounds of work. Since I have observed that there are often 13 steps to a flight of stairs, the work done by a 150-pounder in moving up one step is 1200/13, or 92.3 foot-pounds.

But "feet" and "pounds" are units in the common system which, to scientists, is beneath contempt. The metric system is in universal use outside the United States and is used by scientists even inside the United States. The unit of distance in the metric system is the "metre," which is equal to 3.281 feet; and the "kilogram," which is equal to 2.2046 pounds, is used for weight.

A unit of energy in the metric system would therefore be 1 "kilogram-metre" (here the weight is first, and you don't say "metre-kilogram" because — all together now — "no one does that"). One kilogram-metre is equal to 2.2046 pounds times 3.281 feet, or 7.233 foot-pounds. Therefore, for a 150-pound person to move up one step on a flight of stairs is to do 12.76 kilogram-metres of work.

Using weight as part of a unit of work is not ideal. It is not wrong to do so, for weight is a force, but that is precisely the problem. The units popu-

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larly used for weight (pounds, or kilograms) are not, strictly speaking, units of force, but are units of mass. The confusion arises because weight has been understood since prehistoric times, whereas the concept of mass was first made clear by Isaac Newton, and mass is so similar to weight under ordinary circumstances that even scientists fell into the trap of using the long established units of weight for mass as well, thus creating confusion.

If we forget weight, and deal only with mass, then the definition of force (which arises from Newton's second law of motion) is that of mass multipled by acceleration. Suppose we imagine a force capable of accelerating a mass of 1 kilogram by an amount equal to 1 metre per second. That force is equal to 1 kilogram-metre per second per second, or (using abbreviations), 1 kg-m/sec^2. For the sake of brevity, 1 kg-m/sec^2 is called "1 newton" in honor of the great scientist. As it happens, the force required to lift a weight of 1 kilogram is 0.102 newtons. Conversely, 1 newton is the force required to lift a weight of 9.8 kilograms.

Since work is force times distance, the unit of work would be 1 newton of force expended over a distance of 1 metre. This would be 1 newton-metre. The newton-metre is usually referred to as the "joule," after the English physicist James Prescott Joule, who did important work on energy. The unit of work then is 1 joule, and since the newton is equal to a weight of 9.8 kilograms, 1 joule is equal to 9.8 kilogram-metres. Consequently, lifting 150 pounds up one step of a flight of stairs involves an amount of work equal to 1.3 joules.

As you see, the joule is a good unit of energy for everyday life, since an ordinary action involves a small number which is easily handled.

Suppose, however, that you wanted to deal with much smaller bits of work or energy. You would be involved with tiny fractions of a joule. It might then be helpful to have a smaller unit.

Instead of a force that imparts to 1 kilogram an acceleration of 1 metre per second per second, imagine a force that imparts to 1 gram an acceleration of 1 centimetre per second per second. Now you have a force of 1 gram-centimetre per second per second, or 1 g-cm/sec^2, which can be defined as "1 dyne" (the first syllable of a Greek word meaning "power").

Since a gram is 1/1000 of a kilogram, and a centimeter is 1/100 of a meter, a force of 1 dyne produces 1/100 the acceleration on 1/1000 the mass as compared with a force of 1 newton. Consequently, 1 dyne is equal to 1/100 X 1/1000, or 1/100,000 newtons. That is the same as saying that 1 newton = 100,000 dynes.

If we suppose that 1 dyne is expended through a distance of 1 centi-

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metre, that gives us as a unit of work "1 dyne-centimetre," or "1 erg" (the first syllable of a Greek word meaning "work"). Since a joule is the result of a newton expended over a distance of 1 metre, while an erg is the result of a dyne (1/100,000 of a newton) expended over a distance of 1 centimetre (1/100 of a metre), 1 erg is equal to 1/100,000 X 1/100, or 1/10,000,000 of a joule. That's the same as saying that 1 joule = 10,000,000 ergs.

A 150-pound person going up one step of a flight of stairs does 13,000,000 ergs of work. This is a number that is very inconvenient for everyday life, but is very handy for scientists working with small amounts of energy.

However, even the erg is by far too large a unit when it comes to dealing with individual atoms and subatomic particles. For such things, we need a smaller unit.

Thus, instead of using a mass of a kilogram, or a gram, let us use the smallest mass definitely known to exist. This is the mass of the electron, which is 0.000000000000000000000000000091095 grams, or 9.1095×10^{-28} grams. To avoid all those zeroes, we can take the mass of an electron to be equal to "1 electron."

An electron carries an electric charge, and it therefore undergoes an acceleration in an electric field. That property of the electric field that induces an acceleration is its voltage, so we can suppose that an electron is given an acceleration produced by 1 volt.*

Given the mass and charge of the electron, the work done on it when it is exposed to the acceleration produced by 1 volt, is "1 electron-volt." In abbreviated form, this is "1 ev."

This is a very tiny unit of work indeed. In fact, 1 electron-volt is equal to only a little over a trillionth of an erg. To be more precise, 1 electron-volt = 0.0000000000016 ergs, or 1.6×10^{-12} ergs. (Remember, by the way, that all units of work serve as units of energy as well.)

As it happens, mass is a form of energy; a very concentrated form. Mass can therefore be expressed in units of energy, but mass is such concentrated energy that ordinary units of energy are inconvenient to use in connection with ordinary masses.

Take a mass of 1 gram, for instance. This isn't much. It is only the mass of a half-grown hummingbird. The energy equivalent of that mass, by

**I am resisting the impulse to explain the various electrical units. That is for another essay at another time.*

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Albert Einstein's famous equation, is $e = mc^2$, where e is energy, m is the mass, and c is the speed of light. We are taking the mass as 1 gram, and the speed of light as 29,980,000,000 centimetres per second (a combination that will give us the energy equivalent in ergs). The energy content of 1 gram of mass is, then, 1 X 29,980,000,000 X 29,980,000,000 = 898,800,000,000,000,000,000, or 8.988×10^{20} ergs. You'll admit it's a lot easier to talk about 1 gram, than about nearly a sextillion ergs.

When we get down to the electron, however, things are reversed. The tiny mass of an electron, 9.1095×10^{-28} grams, when multipled by the energy equivalent of 1 gram, which is 8.988×10^{20} ergs, yields the energy equivalent of an electron's mass as 8.1876×10^{-7} ergs. In other words, the energy equivalent of an electron's mass is a little less than a millionth of an erg, which is hard to handle.

If we convert that energy equivalent, however, into electron-volts, which are far tinier than ergs, it turns out that the energy equivalent of an electron's mass is equal to about 511,000 electron-volts.

Of course, 511,000 might still be considered a number that is a bit too large for convenience, but 1000 electron-volts is equal to 1 kilo-electron-volt (kev), and 1,000,000 electron-volts is equal to 1 mega-electron-volt (Mev), so you can say that the energy equivalent of an electron's mass is about half a Mev.

The electron (and its opposite number, the positron) have, as I said earlier, the smallest masses of any object that we definitely know of as having mass at all. It may even be that there cannot be any smaller mass that is still greater than zero. There is some possibility that the various neutrinos may have still smaller masses (see NOTHING AND ALL, February 1981); masses as little as 40 electron-volts; but that is, as yet, far from established.

What about more massive particles?

Electrons make up the outer regions of the atoms, but protons and neutrons make up the atomic nuclei, and the protons and neutrons are considerably more massive than the electrons. A proton has the energy equivalent of 938,200,000 electron-volts, or 938.2 Mev, and is thus 1836 times as massive as the electron. The neutron has an energy equivalent of 939,500,000 electron-volts, or 939.5 Mev, and is thus 1838.5 times as massive as the electron and 1.0014 times as massive as the proton.

An energy of 1,000,000,000 electron-volts is 1 giga-electron-volt (1 Gev), so we can say that the proton and neutron are each very nearly 1 Gev in energy equivalence.

There are subatomic particles more massive than the proton and

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neutron. For instance, the W particle (something I may take up in a future essay) has recently been discovered, and it is roughly 80 times as massive as a proton, so that its energy equivalence is about 80 Gev, or 80,000,000,000 electron-volts. The nuclei of the most massive elements known have energy equivalences in the neighborhood of 250 Gev, which is more than three times larger still, but those nuclei are conglomerates of over 250 subatomic particles.

If we want a real subatomic monster, however, we will have to have a digression first.

Electricity and magnetism are closely related; in fact, they are inseparable. Everything that has an electric field has a magnetic field, and vice-versa. In fact, scientists commonly speak of an electromagnetic field, rather than of either an electric or magnetic field separately. They speak of light as an electromagnetic radiation, and of the electromagnetic interaction as one of the four fundamental interactions of nature.

Naturally, then, it is not surprising that electricity and magnetism, when viewed separately, show many similarities. Thus, a magnet has two poles, showing opposite extremes, so to speak, of magnetic properties. We call them "north pole" and "south pole." There is an attraction between north poles and south poles, and a repulsion between two north poles, or between two south poles.

Similarly, an electrical system has two opposite extremes, which we call "positive charge" and "negative charge." There is an attraction between a positive and negative charge, and a repulsion between two positive charges, or between two negative charges.

In each case, there is both attraction and repulsion of equal intensities, and both the attraction and repulsion fall off in inverse proportion to the square of the distance.

There remains, however, an enormous difference of one kind.

Suppose you have a rod of insulating material in which, in one way or another, you have produced at one end a negative charge and, at the other end, a positive charge. If, then, you break the rod in the middle, one half is entirely negative in charge, the other half is entirely positive. What is more, there are subatomic particles, like the electron, that carry a negative charge only, and others, like the protons, that carry a positive charge only.

Suppose, though, you have a long magnet, with a north pole at one end and a south pole at the other. If you break that in the middle, is one half entirely north pole and the other half entirely south pole?

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No! If you break a magnet in two, the north pole half at once develops a south pole at the break, while the south pole half develops a north pole at the break. Nothing you can do will produce any object possessing only one magnetic pole; both are always present. Even subatomic particles that have an electric charge and, therefore, an associated magnetic field, have both a north pole and a south pole.

Nor do there seem to be particular subatomic particles that carry only north poles or only south poles, though there are countless subatomic particles that carry only positive charges or only negative charges. There seems to be no such thing, in other words, as a "magnetic monopole."

About 1870, when the Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell first worked out the mathematical relationships that described the electromagnetic field as a unified phenomenon, he presented the world with four concise equations that seemed totally sufficient for the purpose for which they were designed. If there had existed magnetic monopoles, the four equations would have been beautifully symmetric so that electricity and magnetism would have represented a kind of mirror image of each other. As it was, however, Maxwell assumed that magnetic poles always existed in pairs, while electric charge did not, and that, perforce, introduced an asymmetry.

Scientists dislike asymmetries, for they offend the esthetic sense and interfere with simplicity (the be-all and end-all of perfect science), so there has been a constant feeling that the monopole *ought* to exist; that it's nonexistence represents a flaw in cosmic design.

After the electron was discovered, there eventually came the realization that electric charge is quantized; that is, that all electric charges are exact multiples of some fundamental smallest value.

Thus, all electrons have an identical negative charge, and all protons an identical positive charge, and the two kinds of charge are exactly equal to each other in size. All other known charged objects have an electric charge that is exactly equal to that of the electron, or of the proton, or that is an exact multiple of one or the other.

(Quarks are thought to have charges equal to 1/3 and 2/3 that of the electron or proton, but quarks have never been isolated — and even if they were, that would merely make the fundamental smallest value a third of what it had been thought to be. The principle of quantization would remain.)

Why should electric charge be quantized? Why couldn't it exist in any uneven value, just as mass does? After all, the mass of a proton is a

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thoroughly uneven multiple of the mass of an electron, so why shouldn't this be true of charge as well?

In 1931, the English physicist Paul A. M. Dirac tackled the matter mathematically and came to the decision that this quantization of charge would be a logical necessity if monopoles existed. In fact, even if only one monopole existed anywhere in the Universe, quantization of charge would be a necessity.

It is tempting to argue the reverse, of course; that since electric charge *is* quantized, magnetic monopoles must exist somewhere. It made increasing sense to search for them.

But where and how do you find them if they exist? Physicists didn't know and, what was worse, they weren't sure what the properties of these monopoles might be. It seemed a natural assumption to suppose they were fairly massive particles, because if so they wouldn't be very common and couldn't be easily brought into existence in the laboratory — and that would explain why no one had happened to stumble across one accidentally.

There was no theoretical guideline more than that until the 1970's, when people were working out various Grand Unified Theories designed to combine the weak, strong, and electromagnetic interactions all under a single set of equations (see AND AFTER MANY A SUMMER DIES THE PROTON, September 1981).

In 1974, a Dutch physicist, Gerard 't Hooft, and a Soviet physicist, Alexander Polyakov, independently showed that it could be reasoned from the Grand Unified Theories that magnetic monopoles *must* exist and that they are not merely massive, they are *monsters*.

Although a monopole would be even smaller than a proton, packed into its tininess might be a mass of anywhere from ten quadrillion to ten quintrillion times that of the proton. If it is at the upper end of this range, a monopole would have an energy-equivalence of 10,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 electron-volts (10^{28} ev).

How much would that be in mass? It turns out that a magnetic monopole might have a mass of as much as $1.8. \times 10^{-9}$ grams. That is equal to the mass of 20 human spermatozoa all packed into a single subatomic particle.

How can such subatomic monsters be formed? There's no way human beings can pack that much energy into a subatomic volume of space, either now or in the foreseeable future. In fact, there's no normal process taking place anywhere in the Universe right now (as far as we know) that could create a particle of such monstrous mass.

The only possibility is to go back to the big bang, when temperatures

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were incredibly high and energies incredibly concentrated (see THE CRUCIAL ASYMMETRY, November 1981). It is estimated that the monopoles must have been formed only 10^{-34} seconds after the big bang. After that, the Universe would have been too cool and too large for the purpose.

Presumably, both north and south monopoles were formed, possibly in enormous quantities. Presumably, a great many of them annihilated each other, but a number must have survived simply because by sheer chance they did not happen to encounter others of the opposite persuasion. After monopoles had survived a certain length of time, the steady expansion of the Universe made it less and less likely that collisions would take place, and that insured their further survival. There are therefore a certain number floating around the Universe today.

How many? Well, not too many, for above a certain number, the gravitational effect of these monstrous particles would have made it certain that the Universe would, before now, have reached a maximum size and collapsed again under its own gravitational pull. In other words, we can calculate a maximum monopole-density in the Universe by simply recognizing the fact that we ourselves exist.

Yet even though few in number, a monopole ought, every once in a while, to move into the vicinity of a recording device. How would it then be detected?

Scientists had earlier expected that monopoles would be moving at nearly the speed of light, as cosmic ray particles do; and that like cosmic ray particles, monopoles would smash up other particles in their path and produce a shower of secondary radiation that could be easily detected and from which the monopole itself could be identified.

Now that the monopole is thought to be of monstrous mass, things have changed. Such huge monopoles couldn't accumulate enough energy to move very rapidly and it is estimated that they would be travelling at a speed of a couple of hundred kilometres per second — less than a thousandth the speed of light. At such slow speeds, monopoles would simply slip quietly past and through matter, without leaving any signs to speak of. It may be that which accounts for the failure to have detected monopoles hitherto.

Well, then, what is to be done?

A physicist at Stanford University, Blas Cabrera, had an idea. A magnet pushing through a coil of wire will send a surge of electric current through that coil. (This has been known for over a century and a half.) Why not set up such a coil, then, and wait? Perhaps a magnetic monopole

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will just happen to pass through the coil and signal its passage by an electric current. Cabrera calculated the chances of that happening on the basis of the top monopole-density that is possible in view of the fact that the Universe exists and decided that one such event might happen every six months on the average.

Cabrera therefore set up a coil of the metal, niobium, and kept it at a temperature near absolute zero. Under these conditions, niobium is superconducting and has zero resistence to an electric current. This means that if anything starts a current flowing in it, that current will flow indefinitely. A monopole passing through the coil won't just give an instantaneous surge of current, but a current that continues and continues.

Naturally, a current could be started by any old magnetic field that happens to be around — the Earth's own magnetic field, those set up by any of a number of technical devices in the vicinity, even by stray bits of metal that happen to be moving because they are in someone's pocket.

Cabrera therefore placed the coil inside a superconducting lead balloon, which was inside a second superconducting lead balloon. Ordinary magnetic fields would not penetrate the superconducting lead, but a magnetic monopole would.

He waited for four months and nothing happened. The current-level marked out on a moving roll of paper stayed near zero throughout. This was, in itself, good. It showed he had successfully excluded stray magnetic fields.

Then at 1:53 P.M., on February 14, 1982, there came a sudden flow of electricity — and in just about exactly the amount one would expect if a magnetic monopole had passed through.

Cabrera checked every possible event he could think of that would have started the current *without* the help of a monopole, and could find nothing. The monopole seemed the only alternative.

Has the elusive monopole been detected, then? If so, it is a remarkable feat and it strongly supports the Grand Unified Theory.

The trouble is, though, that there has been no repetition of that single event, and it is hard to base anything on just one happening.

Then, too, Cabrera's estimate of the number of monopoles floating around was based on the fact that the Universe is still expanding. Some people think that a stronger constraint arises out of the possibility that monopoles floating about the Galaxy would wipe out the general Galactic magnetic field. Since the Galactic magnetic field still exists (though it is very weak), that could set a far lower maximum value on monopole den-

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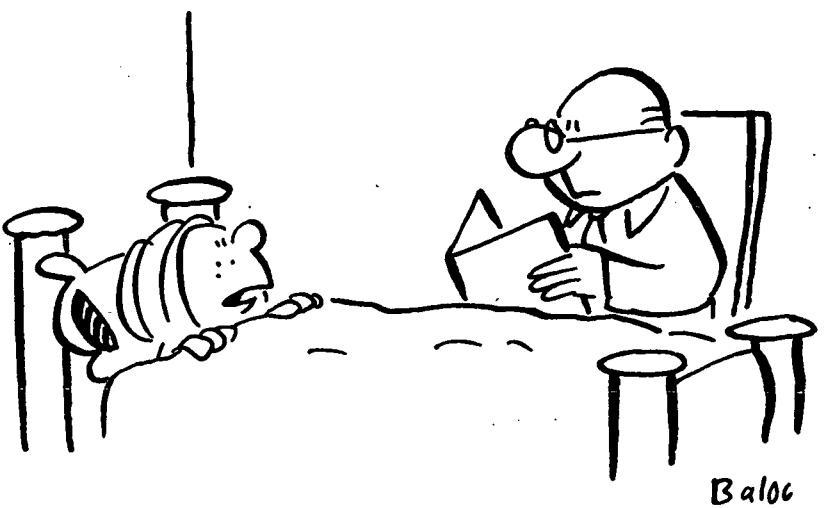
sity, as little, perhaps, as 1/10,000 of Cabrera's figure.

If that were so, one would expect a monopole to pass through his coil once every 5000 years, on the average. And if *that* were so, to have one pass through after only four months of waiting is asking an awful lot, and it becomes difficult to believe that it was a monopole.

There is only one thing to do, and physicists are doing it. They are continuing the search. Cabrera is building a larger and better version of his device that will increase his chances of detecting a monopole fifty-fold. Other physicists are figuring out other ways to go about the detection.

Over the next few years, the search for the monopole is going to increase enormously in intensity for the stakes are high. The definite detection will give us an indication of the properties of the subatomic monster and its numbers. From that, we may learn things about the beginning of the Universe, to say nothing of its present and future, that we might not otherwise ever find out.

And, of course, there's a certain Nobel Prize waiting for somebody.



"Assuming that she could jump over the Moon, what about the problem of re-entry friction?"

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Here is the fourth and concluding story in Ian Watson's series, THE BOOK OF THE RIVER.

The Worm's Head

BY
IAN WATSON

SYNOPSIS

Yaleen's world is split between east and west by a mighty river — and the "black current," a mysterious, powerful alien creature that blocks the midstream, and lets only women ply the waters. Marooned in the unknown west, Yaleen is captured by the Sons of Adam, who believe that humans were sent to this world by the "God-Mind of Eeden" — which maintains a psychic link with far humanity, pulling people's minds back home to Eeden at death. The black current is their deadly, subtle adversary, using women as its tools. Escaping, Yaleen reaches the east again, to warn her guild. But soon the alien entity, the black current, begins to rapidly withdraw upriver (perhaps poisoned, because Yaleen had told the westerner Dr. Edrick of a fungus drug that might be used to disorient the current). Yaleen, who had achieved a certain rapport with the current, is sailing out from the eastern jungle city of Jangali to meet the head of the current passing by, when news is flashed that the Sons of Adam — who earlier burned her brother alive, when he managed to cross to the west — have invaded across the now clear river, downstream at Verrino.

For a while I'd been hearing a twanging sound. At first it was like singing in my ears. As the hour of our rendezvous drew closer, the noise grew louder; though never so loud that it could have been heard from the shore, I don't suppose, unless you placed your ear directly on the water.

It was the sound of a single enormous chord being strummed; it was the hum of the current winding itself back elastically toward the Far Precipices.

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The night sky was two-thirds full of stars; the rest was cloud. With our lanterns doused and our eyes adjusted to the darkness, visibility was about fifteen hundred spans.

Visibility? Ah, that's taking liberties with the word! We would hardly be able to spot details much beyond two hundred spans — and only really when the worm's head sped by at its closest.

I was about to add, "so long as you had the reflexes of a cat." But we used to have a cat back home in Pecawar. Opinion has it that cats can see things that are invisible to human eyes. Well, it isn't true. Half the time cats are simply looking in the wrong direction....

When that head rushed past, we would have about fifteen seconds to see it, but only two or three seconds of clear observation. Unless, of course, the head intended to pause and chat with me. And this I rather doubted.

I was risking lives for a whim — and Tamath was clutching at straws. I already knew that I was going to disappoint her; and anger her more. I was on the point of swallowing my pride and begging her, "Let's call it off. Let's go back." But this would also be dishonest. What, opt out at the last moment? And thus shift the blame? I could tolerate Tamath's hatred (I thought, but not her contempt. Not hers; she didn't deserve to scorn me.

Ah, my famous self-esteem again! Why should I flay myself for it? But I did. It seemed I couldn't win.

"Here it comes!" cried Hali from the mizzen top. Hali wouldn't allow anyone but herself aloft. I hoped she was lashed securely. I clung to the rail, peering aft.

A huge bow wave tossed the *Blue Guitar*. Our boat heeled to starboard. Never had a deck sloped so crazily. From midship came the noise of skidding, crashing, and cries.

And in the midst of this: a dark enormity, a minor hill raced by, as if shouldering our schooner from its slopes. A mound of inky jelly, stiff as muscle.... For an instant in the starlight I saw its face, but an instant was enough.

I'd faced a giant croaker in the jungles: a leathery boulder with bulging eyes and a beaky gash of a mouth. I'd seen gargoyles jutting from the gutters of the Donjon in Pleasegod: twisted faces, perhaps modeled on people burned alive....

This was worse. The gape of its mouth was a slash through the tissue of the hill, wide enough open to gulp a skiff and crew; a mouth that dripped thick strings of glue. A ledge of a chin scuffed the water below. And above: ridges of bulges and pustules — then two hooded eyes. These eyes were set far apart: long, triangular, and white. In them was no expression, no life; as though the salt of the sea had caked them over.

A face sculpted by a lunatic! More awful that it should have such a face,

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than have no face at all! Surely the worst thing in the world would be to stray anywhere near that mouth, those eyes. The creature was a great grotesque tadpole: simply a head, with a tail hundreds of leagues long....

Already it was gone again into the night.

No sooner had the *Blue Guitar* righted itself than we were heaving down into the gulf to port. The boat jarred shudderingly as it met a wall of water rushing back to fill the trough. Something smashed to the deck from aloft. I feared for Hali. (Or was it myself I feared for, if it was she who had tumbled down?)

In fact, we had snapped our spanker gaff....

Presently our lanterns were relit. Just as well they'd been doused, or we might have caught fire. And presently Tamath counted the cost.

"So Zernia broke her ankle. And Challi cracked her skull — let's hope it's only a concussion. Then there's the spanker gaff—"

"Maybe the wood was rotten inside." It probably was, but why didn't I keep my big mouth shut?

Tamath rounded on me. "Don't you *dare* speak of anything on my boat being rotten! Unless it's yourself!"

A whimper of pain mounted to a sudden shriek; Zernia's ankle was being set.

"I'm sorry they got hurt," I said. "Truly sorry."

"Are you indeed? That's very small beer when people are being hacked to pieces in Verrino! So what did you learn, Yaleen?"

What had I learned, indeed? Once again the image of a tadpole came to me. The huge head, the inordinately long tail.

"I think ... maybe it's about to change. Like, yes, like a tadpole that has no further use of its tail."

"You think," she mocked. "And of course by sheer coincidence, just when it decides to 'change,' those bloody Sons decide to attack us."

To this, I had no answer.

"Well, what wise thoughts did it communicate?"

"None," I had to admit.

"None," she sneered.

"Mind you, last time it spoke I was right inside its body."

"So maybe this time we ought to have tossed you overboard, with a line attached! As bait for the worm's brain." And away she stalked.

We spent the remainder of that night in midstream on deep anchor. This was the first time any boat had anchored quite so far out; but our hooks caught on the riverbed with a link of chain to spare. I lay in my bunk during those dark hours like an unhappy, chilly plank. I was sure that I didn't sleep a wink; though I somehow found myself waking later on to the light of dawn.

When we were hoisting sail that morning, a signal flashed that the

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worm's head had passed Tambimatu at seven o'clock....

The *Blue Guitar* headed back to Jangali, where the two crew-women who had deserted slipped back on board again before the day was out. In time for supper, to be exact. Tamath said nothing to them about their absence, and pretended not to notice.

But neither did she broadcast her opinion that it was I who was responsible for the invasion — otherwise, the mood might have turned really ugly. As it was, I had only Boatswain Hali's sullen enmity to contend with. And Tamath's controlled hatred. And some sour looks from other women, who took Zernia's injury personally. Challi had woken up with nothing worse than a headache; and she wasn't the sort to harbor a grudge.

Incidentally, the spanker gaff *had* been rotten at the point where it snapped. It ought to have been replaced, not held together with paint.

Much happened during the next few days, though to begin with, little of it happened in Jangali. We learned of events thanks to signals from Tambimatu, and from points north to the Spire at Verrino.

(What *did* occur in Jangali was: anxious crowds gathering on the quay, flurries of panic, rumors rampant, and a besieging of boats every time a signal tower flashed — since shorelubbers couldn't read the signals. The quaymistress soon appointed a herald to proclaim newly logged messages, and then to pin up the texts on a board in the marketplace. I don't know that this did a great deal to restore daily business to normal.)

From Tambimatu we learned that the worm's head had ended up jammed in that rocky arch below the Precipices. The head now occupied that point of exit and entry like some ghastly gateway, some portal of black flesh — with its drooling mouth agape, its white eyes staring blindly. To inspect, the guild had sent the ketch with no name; thus the crew reported.

Maybe the worm's head had grown in size during the millennia since it first emerged, and now it was too large to slip back inside the mountain. Maybe the bowels of the mountain were already packed solid with its body, leaving no more space within.

Whether it was still alive, or dead and slowly corrupting, who could tell?

From Verrino we learned that the Spire was still in friendly hands. What the observers saw from their vantage point obviously disinclined them to throw in their lot with the invaders. They signaled that the Spire could withstand an eight-week siege; longer on starvation rations.

On the day after the invasion, the signal towers north and south of Verrino had both been burned to the ground — news that scared us all. Why burn something that could be seized and used? Unless the guild signalers

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had held out, and been burned along with their towers....

Yet in the confusion of that first violent night, one yawl had somehow evaded capture and set sail. This yawl took up station upriver. After the towers went up in flames, the yawl could still relay signals from the Spire, southward. No such facility existed to the north of Verrino, thus all contact was lost with the whole stretch of river from Sarjoy to Umdala. Three whole days passed before a brig set sail from Verrino to bear down upon the yawl. The brig was crewed by women, but ineptly so — at least until one of the women was thrown overboard by the men in charge, with her hands and ankles bound. Then the brig's performance improved dramatically. The yawl had to flee upstream; all contact with the Spire was broken.

During those three days the observers reported rafts being rowed back to the west, then returning with more armed men. Had the Sons been able, obviously they would have pressed real boats into service at once; but it had taken them till the third day to round up a scratch crew for the yawl. So most of the boat crews must have deserted to hide in the town. It might have been even wiser to scatter far inland — though I don't know that this would have been *my* first instinct, or any riverwoman's; and soon, of course, the chance was gone.

From aloft, the observers spied murders and rapes by the raggy soldiery.

But then men wearing robes arrived from the west: Edrick's colleagues, and maybe the man himself. Vicious incidents tailed off quickly, in full view at least. Corpses were piled and burned. Looting ceased. Cordons and roadblocks were set up. Patrols prowled the streets, enforcing order. Perhaps the western war leaders deliberately let their soldiers storm around to begin with, to terrorize the town, so that the people of Verrino would feel grateful for the contrast later on. Or maybe the leaders hadn't risked crossing over till the terrain was secure. By the time we lost touch with Verrino, at any rate, an uneasy calm reigned. As yet, the Sons hadn't piled faggots to burn people alive individually....

From Pecawar, dear Pecawar, word continued to flow that all was well. From Gangee and the other towns, likewise. In each a militia was now being hastily raised, though how effective these might prove I could hardly judge by the example of Jangali. Jangali had always boasted an athletic, spirited, tough guild in its junglejacks. Before long, teams of 'jacks were marching about Jangali armed with machetes, axes, and billhooks. No doubt this was fine for morale — but good for what else? There was only wild jungle opposite, and for long leagues northward.

Meanwhile, leaders of the jungleguild and our own riverguild conferred for days on end about what to do. Coded messages were flashed, as well

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as plain — shorelubbers noticed no difference. I began to worry that Marti had been all too right about the absence of authority.

But then, ten days after the invasion of Verrino, a tight-lipped Tamath instructed me to accompany her to a meeting at the hall of the jungle-guild....

The Jay-Jay Hall, as it was known locally, was a massive wooden edifice on the edge of the new town: a real temple of tree trunks roofed by great beams and naked rafters, with clerestory windows for light and air. Entering the hall was like boarding a great landship, largely devoted to an empty hold. The principal chamber contained no furniture at all, as though it were an insult to giant trees to trim them into tiny chairs. Instead, everyone sat on tasseled cushions arrayed on the waxed plank floor — and you'd better be sure to leave your boots in the lobby.

I was seated cross-legged beside Tamath. Twenty 'jacks and riverwomen were present in all; and before very long a 'jack dressed in the typical baggy trousers and scarlet jerkin, and sporting a braggartly black moustache, was asking:

"And why should Jangali be invaded *soon?* Tell me that! If I was a westerner, sod his guts, first I'd secure Verrino. Wrap it up tight. Rule the place till the people knew nothing else. After a year or two I'd pick off Sarjoy, then Aladalia, as leisurely as can be. Sew them up, too. Where's the hurry? It's us that are in the mess, with our trade marching round the town with axes on our shoulders, that should be lopping trees."

A boatmistress said, "Well, *I'd* hurry. Because the current might come back!"

"Come back? Why should your mascot come back? You're crying for the moon."

I'd sometimes wondered what a moon must be like. A ball of rock floating above the clouds? A kind of cold sun? The jibe was insulting.

"I hope you aren't suggesting that women have become like children suddenly. To operate our trade routes you need fully experienced—"

"Persons. Male or female. And s'pose those Sons send boats to raid, like pirates in some Ajelobo romance, who'll be best to fight them off? Those as knows sails and needles? Or those who know axes?"

"Mister, it takes time to learn the ropes."

"And maybe we've got time. Five or ten years."

Another junglejack spoke up. This man was older, with a birthmark — a squashed cherry — on his cheek.

"You riverwomen certainly need to buck your boat crews up with those of the ax, as my friend says. A woman's no match for a hefty man in most fights. But there's danger in hanging back from the fight too long. We might

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find ourselves stuck in midair with no momentum. We simply can't let those Sons pour thousands of soldiers over the river. And I'll tell you why. Judging from what that stupid snitch of a girl said, those westerners are a lot poorer than us materially. Now they'll have heaps of our own goods to use against us. No matter how much they mess up the places they capture, they'll only get richer and stronger."

So the riverguild — or Tamath — had already told the jungle-guild about my travels....

I was incensed; I spoke without thinking. "That stupid snitch is sitting right here!" I said loudly. I realized only after I'd let this out of the bag that I must have been present for a reason: as a card for our guild to play. But what card could I be?

There were a few intakes of breath. Men's eyes bored holes in me. Women looked embarrassed. Tamath snarled softly, "Shut it!"

"O.K., O.K.," I muttered.

"Well. well!" declared Moustache. "I'd say the riverguild owes us one for that. Why's *she* here? So that we can send her up a jungle giant without a safety line? Or spit her on a spine-tree? Or stick her on a bonfire? Then both guilds shake hands afterward?" His loud voice sounded more threatening than perhaps he meant it to, I had to remind myself.

Surely this wasn't the card that Tamath hoped to play? To toss me up into the treetops as a way of repairing interguild relations?

"We don't *quite* go in for that kind of thing," Moustache went on acidly. "You misunderstood our little annual festival."

"Nothing of the sort was in our minds," protested Tamath. "We can discuss *her* later on." She addressed the man with the birthmark: "Sir, we agree with you that time isn't our friend. And when I say 'our,' I include everyone living on the east bank — man or woman, from Jangali or Gangee. So therefore...," and she glanced at the quaymistress of Jangali, a plump silver-haired woman named Poula.

"So therefore," continued Poula smoothly, "we must urge the recapture of Verrino as soon as possible. How may this be accomplished? First, we should restore communications with the towns of the north so that we can coordinate efforts. We should build balloons to carry couriers over the occupied zone — and spy on it. This can be done."

A 'jack whistled. "Can it, just?"

"We think so. There'll need to be tests."

"And light-weight couriers! Now I see where the girl fits in."

Poula ignored this. "Next, we need weapons that can match those pistols of the Sons. Guineamoy will have to manufacture these. Therefore Guineamoy must be strongly defended. The Sons might attack Guineamoy next."

"Knowing about its workshops, as they do." Moustache glared at me.

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"Oh, a fool could tell from all the smoke!" said Poula.

"Really? Then why didn't the Sons attack Guineamoy to begin with? Why Verrino?"

Maybe the answer to that was that Dr. Edrick had wanted some decent spectacles.... I suppressed this flippant thought.

"Three reasons. Guineamoy must have seemed our strongest town. They may not have known quite what they were up against."

"Now they do. And the answer is: Not much!"

"Next, Verrino is close to Manhome South, where those 'Crusaders' might be more influential. Unless we strike back and win, they'll soon be influential everywhere in the west. Finally, the Sons had a convenient launching place in Minestead. So now Guineamoy must be defended." Poula looked round the meeting. "Defended by whom?" she asked rhetorically. "And who will recapture Verrino with the weapons made in Guineamoy? Success in this enterprise requires a team who can lay off their ordinary guild work for months without disrupting essential supplies such as foodstuffs....

"In a word, the junglejacks. Women 'jacks can carry on jungle-guild business in the meantime, on a trimmed-down basis."

Moustache stared at Poula. "So what you're proposing is that we purge our own guild down to the women members — and turn the other ninety-odd percent of us into your army!"

"It'll be *everyone's* army: the army of the east. But an army, yes. Meanwhile, riverwomen will be busy ferrying fighters and weapons. Don't worry, we'll be doing our bit."

"Aye, by shipping us off to a foreign town. Men don't go gadding about like you lot, with a lover in every port. Some would say: 'What's Guineamoy to us that we should quit our homes, leaving Jangali unguarded?' Some might say we could survive quite well on our own, from Bayou down to Tambimatu."

Surely some Jangali men must have come from Verrino originally! Yet it was a truism that new allegiances thrust out old....

"Don't worry about your hometown. The jungle adequately protects Jangali from attack."

"Exactly!"

Poula wagged a finger. "Until the day when the Sons come sailing upstream — picking off one town, then the next!"

"She's right, you know," said Birthmark.

Moustache subsided somewhat. "So we're to pack our bags, and garrison Guineamoy?"

"Yes," she said.

"While the Guineamoy guild makes lots of pistols and things, for us to go to war with?"

"We haven't time to mince words or be diplomatic, sir. Yes, yes. It's the

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only way. Guineamoy is prepared to tool up to make swords and pistols. And explosive bombs that you can catapult from a boat deck, or drop from a balloon. And incidentally," she added, "please don't think too harshly of Yaleen. She did tell us about their guns and how the Sons govern the west; that's useful."

But I wondered whether she was defending me personally, or simply the honor of the guild....

"Almost as useful," snapped a 'jack with a vein-smashed drinker's face, "was what she told them about *us!* And about the poison those Barbra weirdos use."

I winced. I did manage to stare back at him, though perhaps my face was as flushed as his.

"We'll need to discuss your proposal," said Moustache. "We'll give you an answer tomorrow."

"Guineamoy already agreed," said Poula.

"Maybe that's because they're closer to the action, and bit more exposed? And maybe the almighty river-guild promised to remit their cargo fees for the next couple of years?"

Poula snorted. "Next you'll be fretting in case we charge you for troop transport!"

She didn't actually answer his question, though. This, I thought, was foolish. If the 'jacks sailed to Guineamoy, sooner or later they would discover whether there was anything in this wild surmise. And who would fight with a stout heart if they even suspected that they were being diddled?

Yet who was I to criticize?

"Tomorrow," repeated Moustache. He stood up, in one smooth scissoring action. Other 'jacks followed suit.

"Wait. One thing more. We haven't discussed the motives of the Sons enough. Their beliefs."

"So? You can turn that one loose on the savants and nitpickers down Ajelobo way."

"We may indeed."

"Marvelous! That'll amuse us while we're on guard duty, and exploding ourselves and dying messily. I wonder how many cords of wood they'll need to print their fantasies?"

Poula remained patiently sitting. Reluctantly, a few 'jacks sat down again. Not Moustache, though.

"You have to know what your enemy thinks," she said. "One key to this is what the black current is."

"What is *was*, you mean."

"Is still! Coiled up as it is, within the Precipices."

"Who cares? Sod all effect it has on the river now."

"Yet it still reaches into all of us, who are of the river," Poula said patiently.

Moustache looked blank.

"I assure you of that, Mr. 'Jack. May I vomit if I lie, or betray."

"What on earth are you talking about? What's wrong with you?"

Poula was shivering. Her face had

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blanched. She bit on her lip. Moustache stared at her hard, then nodded — as though persuaded, of something at least. Abruptly Poula fainted and keeled over. Her neighbor tended to her, tucking a cushion under her head.

"O.K., so I'm impressed," said Moustache. "What conclusion am I meant to draw?"

Tamath took over again. A little too slickly for my taste, as though this incident — genuine though I knew it to be — had been rehearsed beforehand. "And the key to the current," she said, "must be in its head. Where else? Tambimatu tells us that its mouth gapes open." I mistrusted her tone mightily. "An open gateway is an invitation."

"To be swallowed?" Moustache laughed. "Maybe its mouth just stuck in that position. Maybe it's dead."

"In that case, Poula would not have felt so sick and fainted."

"Poo to that," said the florid-faced 'jack. "Some folk believe an idea strong enough, they can make their own hair fall out."

Yet Moustache looked impressed despite himself. "So the thing has a key stuck in its throat. What of it?"

"We will send someone through that open mouth to investigate. We will send the only person who claims to have talked to it. We'll send *her*."

Me.

I'm sure if Poula had been conscious, she would have announced this with less vindictive relish.

Moustache guffawed. "Heh heh! That's one better than sending her up a jacktree without a line."

But the 'jack with the cherry stain broke in. "Let's face it: what's going on is an invasion. An invasion by barbarians — who'll probably like you and me just as much as they like the ladies here. If jumping into the thing's mouth helps us any, I say we should welcome it."

"Another reason for honoring Yaleen with this special mission," added Tamath, with a nasty smile, "is that she seems to have a certain talent for survival. For popping up again. For being regurgitated."

Which did nothing to diminish the very hollow feeling I had in my tummy....

The next day the 'jacks did give their answer, though I wasn't present myself; and the answer was yes. Yes, they would transform their guild into an army to defend Guineamoy. Yes, they would liberate Verrino. Not try to. They *would* liberate it. When a 'jack decided to fell a tree, that tree fell.

So a day later the *Blue Guitar* set sail for Tambimatu with everyone on board in a relatively cheerful mood. Now that Tamath had won a victory or two, she was more relaxed. And when she told the crew the purpose of our trip — that I had volunteered to enter the worm's head — they eased off in their attitude to me. ("Just so long as we don't have to pilot her personally," observed Zernia, who was up

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and about now and hobbling on a crutch. "No, no," Tamath hastened to assure her. "The black ketch will carry Yaleen.") Even Hali softened her heart toward me, and became less abrasive.

Ah, my chance to save the guild! To be a heroine, pure and simple. Or a dead one.

During that voyage I often found myself recalling my glimpse of the lunatic head: the blind eyes, the mouth dripping glue.... I tried not to dwell on this, but I had time on my hands. I was forbidden to undertake any strenuous duties — just in case I broke a leg, accidentally on purpose.

So I spent my spare hours reading the *Blue Guitar*'s small library of Ajelobo romances, studying in disbelief the antics of their heroines and heroes. Nobody ever asked *them* to stuff themselves down a giant dripping gob. Now that some days had lapsed since the plan was mooted, it seemed the height of craziness to try to communicate with the worm by this means. What would *you* think if a bug tried to make friends with you by leaping into your mouth? The venture seemed ever more like some primitive rite of human sacrifice; oh, yes, I found a fine example of *that* in one romance — though naturally the heroine rescued her boyfriend in the nick of time....

We passed Port Barbra without putting into port. Soon we were approaching Ajelobo, source of those fantasies that had delighted me once; Ajelobo, whose wiser residents would soon be given the nut to crack: of whether we were free individuals or puppets. To gnaw at this nut — while 'jacks died for freedom's sake; I could appreciate Moustache's sarcasm. No doubt Ajelobo savants would still be debating when a tide of Sons rolled up the river to answer them with steel and fire. Long after *I'd* been digested as a worm's breakfast.

With Ajelobo half a league ahead, Tamath came to where I was lounging in a deck chair; she was rubbing her hands contentedly.

"Signal just came. The first lot of 'jacks are sailing. Isn't that great?"

"Great," I agreed. "And what happens when they've won Verrino? Will they go back to chopping wood? Will they disband of their own accord?"

"If the current doesn't return, I suppose we'll need a garrison in every town from the Bayou northward. For a while, at least."

"For a while — or forever? We'll need a standing army, Guildmistress, and our riverguild to serve it. That's quite a change."

"In that case we might have to *invade* the west, and depose those Sons."

"That's no answer, either. What price the rules of marriage afterward? What of the wander-months for girls? What of men staying put? What of *The Book?* All down the drain."

"Yaleen, you're forgetting the economic power of our guild."

"And you're forgetting how that

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power depends on our having a monopoly! I don't see any way back to where we were before. Paradise is lost, because the worm has gone."

"In that case," said Tamath tightly, "it had damn well better come back. You'll see to that, won't you, dear? Then you'll be promoted to 'mistress, just like me."

"Oh, sure, I'll see to it. Dead easy, really! I just pat it on its snout, gaze soulfully into its eyes and ask, "Is oo sick, Wormy? What medicine makes oo well? Me? Am I oo's medicine, Wormy? Tell-ums, then!"

Tamath slapped me briskly on the cheek, and strode away. Soon there was cheering on deck, and up aloft, as she shouted out the decoded signal.

With watering eyes I returned to my romance, of *The Cabin Girl and the Cannibal.* One by one I tore out pages, folded them into darts and launched them over the rail. Soon we had a little paper chase behind us — though nothing much compared with the expanse of water.

Tambimatu again! The Precipices soaring up through the clouds; spinach puree humping up against a town that couldn't see beyond its own roofs nodding together.... Jewels and muck.

I blew my accumulated cash, upward of sixty fish, on a splendid diamond ring. If I was doomed to plunge into foul saliva, I might as well be well dressed for the occasion — if only on one finger.

The guild had other notions of how I should costume myself for the encounter. Somebody must have had a fine sense of irony: the guild had prepared a sort of diving suit.

"For your protection, Yaleen," explained the squat, bland quaymistress; she who had skippered us to the Precipices and back, the year before. On a table in her office rested a glass helmet, a tight pigskin bodice with a brass collar to clamp the helmet to, and lots of straps on the back; and a tough belt with a padlock of a snaplink.

"Why not naked, rubbed with costly oils and unguents?" I'd found the word *unguent* in *The Cabin Girl and the Cannibal.* It sounded sexy.

"You might need air, Yaleen. We've considered the way your brother crossed the river. See this valve here, in the glass? You'll carry several compressed-air bottles linked in series on your back — enough for two hours. The finest craftsmen in Tambimatu have made them. The bottles are going through final trials right now."

"Are they of gold and silver?"

"And there'll be a long rope fixed to this harness, so we can pull you out."

"Oh, won't I just be the fly on the angler's line! Shouldn't I have a hook in my ribs? So you can winch the whole worm out of its hidey-hole, when it bites? Then the good boat *Nameless* can tug it downstream all the way to Umdala."

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"I'm glad to see you've braced your spirit for what may prove something of an ordeal."

"Ordeal? Gosh, I'm used to it! The only thing that mildly worries me is, how will it *hear* me through the helmet?"

"You can set your mind at rest on that score. If there's no result, we'll send you in again without a helmet. Now here's the lamp you'll use...."

At least this time, unlike my first trip to the head of the river, we would be dispensing with any banquets or solemn hoo-ha. Who needed them? For some curious indefinable reason I felt quite off my food — and as for solemnity, whatever flip badinage I might utter, you can believe I felt solemn enough inside. In the pit of my tummy.

I was to transfer to the black ketch immediately. Departure time was set for a day hence.

So out to the moored ketch I was rowed by an apprentice, the oars dabbling like ducks on a pond. As our rowboat neared the ketch, a face peered over the gunwale: a face as ruddy as the sun through morning mist, a red orb topped with straw — and the sun rose a little in my heart.

"Peli! Peli, it's you!" I cried.

A moment later I was scrambling up the ladder, boarding. Peli from Aladalia! The water-wife with the warbling voice!

For five seconds we simply stared at one another. Then Peli cried, "Why, let me take a look at you!" and did just the opposite, rushing to embrace me and thump me about the shoulders to check that I was solid. I laughed and laughed; so did she.

"Oh, it's so good to see you!" I gasped, when we untangled. "But what are you *doing* here? Surely you haven't been stuck in Tambimatu ever since—"

"What, faithfully dragging the river for your body? No fear! Mind, I gave that skinny bitch what for. The one who wanted you overboard. Don't know if you heard me...."

"I *was* a bit busy at the time.... No, but I did hear you cry out. And I felt your fingers trying to save me."

"Bless you, when I saw you leap on this gunwale and scuttle along the boom!"

"Did you sail to the current again, this Eve past?"

"No, I was in Ajelobo. The guild summoned me here. I'd been with you last time, that's why. Thoughtful of them, eh? The crumb of comfort. Some of the other 'sisters who'll be with us, *they* sailed to the head this time. And I can tell you they're definitely a better bunch than that tight-nosed lot *we* had. The only fly in the ointment is old Nothing-Bothers-Me — she's skipper."

"I know. I've just come from her office. She's been working overtime, welding me a wedding costume. It sure looks tight. That old worm had better not put me in the way of a baby."

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Peli laughed and caught my hand to admire the diamond ring. "Is this the wedding band? Won't the worm have a job slipping it on? He's a bit on the fat side."

"Oh, Peli! Same old Peli. I bought the ring to make me feel good. *Something* has to. Well, *you* do. Being here."

"Hmm, not completely the same old Peli. Bit bothered, in fact. About Aladalia. I was down there in the summer, and now what's going on?" She sighed — but then her sun shone brightly again. "Oh, the hell with that. You've got enough worries for six people. And six just happens to be the number of the crew. Come meet your 'sisters!"

They were indeed a much better bunch. Three of them — Delli, Marth, and Sal — had just sailed to the head and the midstream. Laudia and Sparki were veterans from way back who had been in Tambimatu when events, also, came to a head.

Laudia was a boatmistress and Sparki her boatswain. These two had been together a long time. Laudia was as blonde and elegant as Tamath, though with none of Tamath's ambitious insecurity. Sparki was dusky, diminutive, and peculiarly boylike. Peculiar, in the sense that the current hadn't thought so when she drank her slug of it. Sparki looked just the sort of person I thought the current weeded out: like a boy who had run away to the river in girl's clothes — as in one daft romance I once read, written without any knowledge of the actual facts.

Plainly enough this bosom couple were the two individuals on board most trusted by the guild; on account of their love of the river and love of each other, which were intertwined. The way of the river was the bond of their relationship; I could tell that from a dozen touches and tones of voice. Lose one; loosen the other? Perhaps. So Laudia and Sparki could be relied on to do whatever the guild required. At least I felt sure they wouldn't behave like martinets.

Five. And Peli made six. Me, seven.

Only, *I* wasn't crew; I was something else. I was the bucket to dip in the current's jaw.

After our supper of pork stew and rice that evening, we drank delicious strong green tea: Tambi-maté. In its storage jar Tambi-maté looked like a dollop of local puree, dried. Generous wads were infused in boiling water in individual glass tumblers with real silver caps. Then you sucked the liquid through a thin metal pipe; and quite hard you had to suck, too. Sal, herself from Tambimatu, did the honors. The drinks set was hers, presented by proud parents when she was chosen for the New Year's Eve trip.

We drank quite a few glasses, getting a queer untealike buzz from the drink, a buzz quite different from tipsiness. This was a clearheaded bright elation, accompanied by a slight anes-

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thetizing of the body so that after a time I couldn't tell whether I'd had enough to eat, too much, too little, or nothing; and I didn't care which. If only I'd had a jar of Tambi-maté with me a year earlier! It was perfect for someone lost in a jungle, with only grubs and roots to eat and keep down. Though I'm not sure quite how I would have heated the water....

"Will you sign you glass?" asked Sal, after the fourth or fifth infusion.

"Eh?"

"Your glass. Sign it with that diamond. Delighted to see you supporting local crafts, by the way!"

"You want me to scratch my moniker on this glass because I bought a jewel in town?"

"No, of course not! I want you to do it because there'll be songs sung about you in future years, and tales told."

"If there are, let's hope *I* get the chance to write them, or else they'll be a pack of lies."

"You will. I know you will! In fact, start scribing now: your name, I mean." Sal giggled. "Please! For luck."

"Go on," urged Delli.

"Well, O.K., then." Feeling rather peculiar about this — and realizing that I hadn't escaped ceremonies, after all — I tucked the glass into my lap and inscribed "Yaleen" as legibly as I could.

Sal held the glass up to the lantern to admire, tilting it about; she had to, to make sense of the spidery scratches against the sodden leaves within.

"I've spoilt it, haven't I?"

"Oh, no! Absolutely not! I'll treasure this."

I felt light and euphoric. "It's my glass gravestone," I joked. "Will you put flowers in it if I die?"

She grinned. "No, but I'll drink Tambi-maté from it. All my days."

A while later, Peli blinked repeatedly as if to bring a bright idea into focus. "Yaleen, I've been meaning to ask: Why *did* the current call you, a year ago? It wasn't objecting to you; otherwise, you'd be dead. So what was special about *you?* I don't mean that as a put-down—"

"No, no, you're right!" She was, too. It seems astonishing in retrospect, but I had never actually asked myself this. I took it for granted, because it had happened to *me.* Like everyone else, I was the heroine of my own life, the center of the universe, et cetera. Why shouldn't something extraordinary steer itself my way?

"Maranda wondered about that," volunteered Laudia.

"What, old Nothing-Bothers-Me?"

"*That* would bother her. She's been presiding over the annual trip for years. So when she heard you'd come back from the west, and hadn't been driven mad and drowned, she started puzzling. And she came up with an answer. You were very fast to be honored, Yaleen. I don't know why! Not quite two years on boats, and there you were sailing to the current—"

"I could tell you why, but it's a

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long story, full of Junglejack Festivals and..." (And fungus drugs. Better not tell it, after all....)

"Let's just ascribe it to your sterling qualities, eh?"

"Um. Right. Qualities now in demand again.... But what's the answer?"

"That you'd drunk of the current more recently than anyone else who ever made the New Year's Eve trip. So maybe that's why it called you. Because you were more in tune with it."

"More in tune? The current can call a girl who fails her initiation, from a whole league away! It can call a man who tries to travel twice—"

"It can't *talk* to them, only craze them and destroy them. That's why Maranda is bringing a fresh slug of the current on board tomorrow: some new vintage for you to drink. Plus, some left over from last year, in case this year's has something wrong with it."

"Oh, shit! Look, I got through the current again just a bit ago. I probably swallowed dribbles and dribbles of it."

"But did it talk to you? Maybe it couldn't quite reach you."

"Maybe it couldn't be bothered."

"So another slug or so should tune you up nicely."

"Tune me up, indeed!" I swung round. "Peli, dear Peli," I begged, "give us all a real tune."

"O.K." And Peli gave voice.

Now, this might have been unkind if we had just sat and listened, grinning within. But we didn't. We all joined in; and not simply to drown Peli out. For the song was that irresistible one:

Under the bright blue sun
River-run, river-run!
Under the stars on high
Sails fly, sails fly!
Under the masts so tall....

Presently, Sal held up the signal glass again, canting it to catch the light. "Our boat ought to have a naming, too!"

"Why not?" agreed Marth. "Fat lot of use Old Nameless'll be if the current never comes back."

"What name does the current need to heed?" Delli thumped the bulkhead. "Boat, I name thee *Yaleen!*"

"I'll go one better," promised Sal. "I'll paint *Yaleen* on the prow tomorrow."

We all laughed. I didn't think she would.

Next morning, Quaymistress Maranda boarded, bringing with her the "diving suit," air bottles, and rope. And when she boarded, Sal was hanging over the side, just finishing daubing my name in yellow paint. Maranda grumbled and groused at this defacing of her precious ketch, till Laudia exclaimed exasperatedly, "We can always black it out afterward!" Sensing unified opposition, Maranda conceded.

I drank her slugs of the black current, to no very noticeable effect; and soon we set sail.

* * *

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All too quickly for me, we reached the head of the river — and the worm's head, protruding gargoylelike from that stone arch with its chin resting on the water.

Was the sight more appalling by daylight? I'd feared it would be. Yet I found I could control my rising hysteria by telling myself that this thing wasn't alive — it was simply a mound of crudely sculpted mud, or maybe basalt covered with mold.

When I'd last seen the worm's head, it was moving. Now it wasn't. The only movement was of water lapping it. Just so long as it didn't move! Just so long as a white eye didn't blink — why, that eye could be a slash of chalk! Even the drool in the worm's jaw hung motionless, like slimy stalactites.

We maneuvered the *Yaleen* through some downbeating air turbulence almost up to the lip itself, deep-anchoring in the very lee of the Precipice where there was a pocket of calm.

The Precipice! Ah, better that I hadn't looked upward! I couldn't believe that what loomed above could be a vertical rock face. It just had to be the real surface of the world. In which case, how come we were floating horizontal to it?

The whole world bent abruptly at right angles here, causing an awesome sense of vertigo. For a moment I imagined this was the effect of the slugs I'd drunk. But no; it was a consequence of the planet's being hinged in half. I didn't dare look up again; or I would fall, fall upward.

We worked silently most of the time, and spoke in hushed tones if we had to say anything. I don't think this was from fear of alerting the worm. No, it was because any words would be as stray melting snowflakes in that place; they would vanish before they could make their mark.

Sparki and Sal helped me don the diving costume. They strapped the bodice skintight, then slotted in the air bottles behind, which effectively blocked access to the straps themselves. The helmet was clamped to the brass collar, a valve was turned, and I breathed bottled air smelling faintly of burnt oil. Maranda locked one end of the thin, tough rope to my belt at the base of my spine; the rest of the rope lay in loose coils, with the far end tied to the capstan. She lit my lamp and clipped this to the bracket on my helmet. Then Peli thrust out the gangplank, onto the lip of the worm.

We were ready. I was ready. (And a little voice was gibbering somewhere, "Ready? How can anyone ever be ready for *this?*" I ignored the voice inside my head, since it was my own and I didn't wish it to reach my lips.)

Peli squeezed me in her arms — provoking one of the few sounds : a loud *tssk* of disapproval from Maranda, in case any of my fine equipment, product of the best Tambimatu artificers, should get scratched or crumpled before the worm could have its way....

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Then I walked the plank, with the rope paying out lightly behind me. I stepped onto the lower lip cautiously in case it was slippery and I skidded off into the water. Which would be an uncomfortable and ignominious beginning. But in fact the surface of the lip felt tacky, like paint that hadn't quite dried; and it yielded to the pressure of my feet, giving lots of grip.

Turning, I saluted the *Yaleen* with my diamond ring upraised. I don't know that the crew recognized the gesture as a salute; maybe they thought I was giving them the finger. I elbowed a dangling rope of drool aside — it didn't snap, just bent. I elbowed another gooey streamer, and shoved my way between them.

The inside walls of the mouth were bulgy and bumpy, and so dark they seemed to drink my lamplight. To see, I had to swing my head from side to side. Shadows ducked and dodged, as if racing round to ambush me from behind. I couldn't flick the beam too fast without dizzying my brains. Above me I saw a dark dome, sprouting warts the size of cushions....

Hard to look down, encumbered as I was with helmet, bodice, and bottles ... but a ridgy floor below. Slicker and firmer than the lip.

As I stepped on in, my legs started to shake. Scared? Of course I was scared.

And of course that wasn't why my legs were wobbling.

To say that the floor split open under me would be too precise by far. It would grossly flatter the chaos of the next few moments. Before I knew it, I was a toddler careering down her first carnival slide, shrieking aloud ... rope snaking behind ... black jelly curve above ... light swirling, head thumping and bumping.... Then the lamp went out. I realized I'd been swallowed only when I was halfway down the gullet already.

The tube swooped upward briefly. Impetus carried me over a brink. I sprawled in pitch-darkness.

And now I *was* shaking, like a leaf. I'd pissed myself, too. Hot at first, then clammy-cold. The blackness was absolute. In fact, you couldn't even call it blackness. It was *nothing*. I might as well have gone blind.

I lay very still. Or tried to. Since nothing further happened, I rolled over after a bit and felt about. Soft clammy texture here ... slithery and harder over there, like muscle.... My fingers closed on a tentacle, shied away. Give three tugs for "Pull me back, quick"?

But beyond being gulped down, nothing dire had happened. At least I wasn't floundering in acid juices. I continued exploring, very gently. Each new span my fingers touched was so much extra safety, so much breathing space. And so much extra cause for jitters, because the very next grope might bring me up against ... who knew what?

I thought my blind eyes were play-

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ing tricks: I saw a flash, a flicker.

I shuffled about, and focused on a spot of shimmery blue. This brightened to a glowing patch. I held very still, hardly breathing. Perhaps the light was only a few spans from my face. In which case, it was far too close!

The glow continued to intensify, but since this had no effect on the darkness near at hand, it must be distant. Then all of a sudden everything adjusted mentally, and I *knew* that I was peering along a tunnel of some kind, which eventually debouched into somewhere far larger that was aglow with the blue light. I stood up, stretched tall, and my fingertips brushed the roof above. Shuffling to left then to right, arms outstretched, I discovered curving walls; these were squashy, though interspersed with stiffer "muscle-ribs."

So I began to plod forward in the direction of the light, holding my hands ahead of me. After the first ten paces, I stepped out more boldly. And the glow increased in apparent size.

A few minutes later I stood in the doorway to a cavern that was eerie and enchanting. Curving walls and vaulted roof were ribbed and buttressed with blue bone, or stiffened muscle. All across a misty floor, fronds waved like underwater weed. Warts humped up through the low mist and hairy "vegetation" in a line of stepping-stones. And all glowed softly in various tones of light or dark blue: the fronds were almost mauve, the warts a brighter turquoise as though to mark the way. The cavern was long, long. Far off, the ground mist seeped upward to become a general dense azure fog. Was this cavern part of the Worm — or was the Worm's substance coating cavern walls?

The stepping-stones led straight to a kind of island: a large hump of milky, veiny powder blue. "Opal Island," I thought, giving it a name.

And here was I, held back in the very doorway by that damned rope! Which Maranda had so thoughtfully locked onto me, in case any meddling little fingers inside the Worm unknotted it. By now the rope had reached its limit.

Retreating a few paces, I gathered slack — and set to work fraying the rope with my diamond. Obviously I had to go on into the womb-cavern — why else had it lit up for me? I sawed away till I thought the stone might part from its setting; but Tambimatu craftsmanship prevailed. As well it should; I'd paid a whole bag of coins for the ring! At last the strands parted.

Pry as I might, I couldn't budge the air bottles; though at least I could unclamp the helmet, which was steaming up....

The cavern air smelled faintly of dead fish and humus; nothing very stomach-churning — no swamp gas or intestinal stenches. Once the helmet

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was wrenched free, the bottled air blew an annoying draft against my neck; I would probably end up with a stiff neck or earache....

Still and silent stretched the cavern, save for a slight bubbling or susurrus amidst the misty fronds.

Should I bellow out, "I'm here"? The worm must know that already. I kept quiet.

I trod across the stepping-stones — without any bother — and reached Opal Island. Closer up, this took on the proportions of the glazed buttock of a giantess: with veins of milky blue flowing within, and a large vague shape like a huge bone, inside toward the top. A rim ran right round the base. As soon as I set foot on this rim, the whole island quaked. Hastily I hopped back onto the nearest stepping-stone.

The trembling quickened; shivers ran up the slope, overtaking one another — then there was a sudden loud *plop*. The whole top of the island split open.

Two seams flopped apart, and a human arm emerged. It wagged about as though waving to me. A bald head and bare shoulders followed. Unsteadily, a naked man stood up. His skin was the unhealthy white of someone newly unwrapped from a long spell in bandages. He looked like a big jungle grub. His groin was as nude of hair as his skull.

The man regarded me out of watery blue eyes — then he took a step, and slipped, and skidded all the way down the side of the island on his buttocks, fetching up with a thump on the rim.

"I—," he croaked. Abruptly he retched up a volume of thin white liquid. Maybe I hadn't too much to worry about from this fellow! Wiping his chin, he tottered erect, and contrived a smile — he pushed at his cheeks with his fingers as though trying on a mask for size.

"Hello, I'm to be your guide. The current took me ... some time ago. I tried to stow away, see. The current kept my body intact, so now I'm representing it."

"A *man* is representing it?"

He examined himself in surprise. "Goodness, I haven't been a man for ages...."

"You haven't been.... Are you *crazy?*"

"Actually, I'm dead.... It kept my body, see. I've been living other lives, in the *Ka*-store."

"In the *what?*" For *Ka* was the name the Westerners gave to the mind-part of a person. They said the *Ka* flew back to Eeden when the body died. Flew to another world.... "Are you from the west bank?" I demanded.

"No ... Sarjoy, once...."

"You did just say '*Ka*,' though?"

He nodded.

"Are the Westerners telling the truth, then? About the God-mind on Eeden? How can there be a *Ka*-store

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here? What *is* it? What does—"

He flapped his hands in distress. "Please!" The dead man gestured at another line of stepping-stones continuing along the cavern toward the azure fog. "Could we possibly...? Sooner we go, sooner I get back to my dreams."

"Go where?"

"To the *Ka*-store."

"How can there be a *Ka*-store here? This isn't Eeden. The current isn't the God-Mind — or is it?"

He slumped down and clasped his hands around his knees. Maybe he had difficulty standing up, after being dead for so long....

"I suppose we've time to spare," he conceded.

"Time? You do realize there's a war on? That good people are being butchered? And all because the current withdrew! Was it poisoned?"

"If only you'd stop bombarding me ... Yes, I realize there's a war on. No, the current wasn't poisoned. Will you listen to me? The black current can store the *Ka*s of the dead, so long as people were close to the current in life. As it links more *Ka*s in its store, so its mind grows in power."

"You mean to tell me that all riverwomen who ever lived are still alive here?"

"Well, they're dead, but yes; they dream each other's lives now. And as they interweave, so the creature who was here before us all seeks ... seeks the mind-key to the universe."

"Oh." The mind-key to the universe. Tamath had speculated that there was a key stuck down the worm's throat.... So it was the key to the universe, was it? But apparantly the worm, too, was still hunting for it. Just then I remembered what Andri had told me: that people couldn't simply arrive on a foreign world and merrily fit in from the word go. "Did the current *shape* this world for us?" I asked.

"I don't follow you."

I did my best to explain. "Did the current alter this world so we could eat and drink and breathe here?" I ended up.

"Quite the contrary! The world grew of its own accord. So did the current: I don't quite know how its body works, by the way, but I do know that it takes energy from water. It splits and burns and changes water.... Well, aeons ago it floated off down the river. And it made a big mistake. On its own, you see, it had no more brain than a worm in the soil. But it can use *other* minds. It has a thirst for them, it can drink them. And after drinking them, it can start to think."

"I sometimes feel that way myself."

The zombi looked irked. "Really? Well, the current sensed dawning minds on the land. So it exerted itself to use these minds. But they were only dawning, and it quenched them instead. They withered and died out. Then for aeons more it just lay inertly, only sensing the slow, dim wits of fish and the like. It hoped other creatures

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might become aware, if it let them alone."

"How could it *hope* for anything, if it hadn't a mind of its own?"

"It sensed. It *felt*. The flow of its being is to *know*, through others. To absorb, to drink...."

"So then I guess the ship from Eeden arrived at Port Firsthome?"

It had indeed. Yet for aeons the creature had been sluggish. It had simply been existing at the bottom of the river like a vegetable.

Before it could grasp what was happening, the world had half-changed. New plants and fish and animals were mingling with the native ones, in some cases pushing old life aside, in other cases even cross-breeding.

Suddenly, as if from nowhere, bright, strong minds were present. Young minds, printed with mature purpose, newly dressed in knowledge. This was the first generation of settlers.

Amongst whom the current dimly detected two varieties of being: those of Flow, and those of Thrust. The one, compatible with it; the other, alien. Excited, confused, it rose from the depths, putting forth its senses — to be dazzled, blinded.

It still couldn't "think" about any of this — which in any case, after all those dormant aeons, seemed to happen instantaneously. And almost immediately, a vast intelligence from far away shone through these bright new minds as through a window; touched the current, tasted it, tried to extinguish it.

This distant intelligence was a being of Thrust, rejoicing in its grandeur and dominion. So, at any rate, it seemed to the current, when the current tried to analyze events long afterward. However, this ambitious intelligence had already transformed almost the whole of its local substance to breed plants and animals that would be at home on the new world, and then to build human bodies, and to light their minds with *Kas* from afar.

Instinctively, the current lashed out to save itself. And there was madness on the land: a storm of forgetting, a whirlwind of disruption. The worm wasn't quite sure whose fault the mind-disaster was. It suspected that the far intelligence might have tried to extinguish its *own* experiment upon this world, to break the link with the creature it had woken.

Some settlers lost less of themselves, some more. All were deeply confused. Two groups survived: one on the west bank, where the far intelligence was remembered, though chaotically; another on the east bank, where its origin was quite forgotten.

Down succeeding centuries, as the current established a rapport with Those of the Flow, in the east, and drank the spirits of the river-dead, it began at last to *know*.

Thus spoke the zombi. His name, he added in an afterthought, was Raf; though he seemed to attach little sig-

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nificance to it, as if it had been centuries since he last used it.

And now events were on the move.

"Poisoned?" Raf chuckled. By now he behaved more naturally, though he wasn't exactly my notion of convivial. "Not on your sweet little life! The current got just the ingredient it needed dumped into it. The rennet, to curd the milk of its mind. To thicken it, enrich it. It had been trying to influence those cult-women inland from Port Barbra, but they were hard to get hold of...."

"What? Say that again!"

Credence, boatswain of the *Spry Goose*, hadn't been so hard to get hold of! Suddenly that whole episode of the Junglejack Festival took on a startling new perspective — and I found myself pitying Credence. She had been manipulated in her beliefs, used as a tool — to be discarded when she couldn't prize open Marcialla's cabin door. Credence mustn't entirely have known why she was conspiring; otherwise, she might have proved more effective. Hell, who was I kidding? With Marcialla unpersuaded and marooned up a tree, it was only by a hair's breadth of bad luck — known as Yaleen — that Credence failed.

Raf looked dreamy. "Ah, I have been one of those cult-women. She fled from her coven to sail the river.... She could see how young they all died, and looking so old! Oh, I've known the Timestop, and the Timespeed.... But never mind about it now."

Never mind? In one sense Credence hadn't failed at all. All unwittingly, she had set *me* up as her successor.

And this, Raf was only too happy to confirm. For the second time within a few seconds, my perspective on events swam inside out.

"You came along just at the right time," he said. "The current read you. *You* proved better. More economical! You solved another problem, besides: how to lure those Sons of the God-Mind closer, so that the current could drink enough dead *Kas* to really get to know them — and taste and test the link to that far puissance...."

"Hang on! Do you mean to say the current provoked this war? Just so that Westerners would get killed, and it could harvest some of them?"

"That is putting it a bit crudely."

"How can it harvest dead Sons now that it has *quit* the battlefield?"

"Never fear! After a while it will return downstream. It can judge the progress of the war by the *Kas* of newly dead riverwomen. Since they're in tune, they still die into it."

"And am I supposed to applaud this clever scheme? Which brings agony and death!" If I'd thought Dr. Edrick was unscrupulous, then surely here was his match!

"Well, it wants to become a god, you see."

"A ... *god?*"

Raf glanced around. I did, too ... and my blood chilled. Surely the cavern walls had crept closer while we

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were talking? Surely the roof was lower than it had been awhile before?

"The Sons would have waged war in any case," Raf said reasonably. "Sooner or later they would have found a means. In fifty years or a hundred. The time isn't important."

"It is, to anybody who's alive!"

This part of the cavern definitely was shrinking. The fronds sprouting out of the ground-mist were getting agitated....

"No, it *isn't* important! Not when you can live a host of other lives hereafter. Nobody who is taken into the *Ka*-store regrets it. And remember, when the current becomes a god, all those *Kas* will be part of that god, too."

"According to you."

"You'll find out soon enough, Yaleen. The current is pregnant with itself—"

"Uh?"

"I'll rephrase that: soon the current will give birth — to something greater than itself. And it feels it should be fertilized—"

"For crying out loud, doesn't it *know*? Who ever heard of getting fertilized *after* getting pregnant?"

"I don't mean literally fertilized. It *senses* that it needs the intimate presence of a living person during the change. Here is the womb; you are the man-seed."

The womb. And right now the womb was undergoing a contraction....

"I'm a woman, you dumb corpse!"

"Please! The current is the Flow; you are the stone that shapes the Flow. You are the agent who helps it change, without changing yourself. It'll keep you in dream-life while it broods around you."

"It brooded round me twice already! And crept and crawled inside me. This is getting to be a habit."

"Ah, but this time—"

"Third time lucky?"

"This time you will be a legend, Yaleen. When you finally walk out of its mouth, salvation will be at hand."

"What if I don't want to be a legend?"

Frankly, I didn't think the current had a chicken's idea what it was doing. If it had, I didn't think much of the plan. Not when the worm was content to start a war to get its way. Even if it did immortalize assorted fallen victims.

Those walls!

The roof!

"Look, I don't want to sound abrupt, but the place is caving in. Good-bye!" I turned and quick-footed it over the stepping-stones toward the tunnel mouth. Fronds writhed up over the warts ahead to block my way.

"Stop!" cried Raf. "The mouth's closed!"

I did stop. "What?"

"The mouth has shut."

Maybe I shouldn't have paused. Fronds were questing for my ankles now. I kicked at them. Maybe

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the zombi was lying?

"There are such rewards, Yaleen! Access to all the lives that women have lived!"

And maybe if I did fight my way out, with my mission unaccomplished, Maranda and Sparki and Laudia would toss me back inside.... While I hestitated, the ceiling slumped a little closer. Obviously the cavern was a hole in the Worm's body, a big bubble it had blown in itself within some vaster subterranean space.

Kindly consider the absurd horror and lunacy of this moment. Outside, the world was in chaos. A giant tadpole wanted to make love to me, or something. And the roof was falling on my head. In such a moment, what could save a girl but a sense of humor? (Or a sense of *rage* — somehow rage didn't seem a useful reaction at this point.) I began to laugh. I doubled up. I creased myself.

"What's wrong?" cried Raf anxiously.

"Oh, nothing...!" With an effort, I controlled myself. "It's so bloody funny, this business of becoming a god! How lucky cats and dogs are, never having to try! Just look at it: this collapsing *Ka*-theodral of a womb ... a zombi for a guide ... the spirits of the dead spun in a yarn ... barrels of minced fungus gotten by devious guile ... all in the guts of a worm ... a war thrown in! And at the end of the tunnel, what: power and visions? Life is quite absurd!"

"But the universe itself is paradoxical," called Raf brightly. "Existence is. I mean, why should anything exist at all? So maybe true knowledge and absurdity are twins. Maybe the one is the key to the—"

"Oh, shut up!"

Already the wart-stones beyond had all vanished under the writhing fronds; where I stood was similarly infested.

"I'm coming back, damn it!" Swiftly the fronds at my feet shrank away.

We set off promptly for the far end of the cavern. Now that I was on the move in the desired direction, the shrinkage back at the island end appeared to have stopped.

So off I trod to confront my destiny, and the Worm's destiny, and the world's; loaded down with useless bottles of fresh air; sporting a jeweled ring, with the power only of cutting rope; and guided by a hairless animated corpse.... As I followed Raf's lead along those wart-stones, I decided that Dr. Edrick and his cronies would never get anywhere with *their* quest for knowledge. They were far too serious about it. The real and the true could be seized only in a laugh, a laugh that would rattle the stars.

And the trouble was, at the same time it all *mattered;* mattered intensely.

Still, I was determined not to be too tense. It's no good tensing up for love,

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eh? And our worm had decided to love me. Somehow.

I was in the midst of finding out how to be mad and sane simultaneously. I hoped the Worm could perform the same balancing trick. Then maybe it *would* graduate into a god....

I hadn't know what to expect. A mound of jelly shot through with sparks? A pool, depth-full of flickering, darting starlight: *Ka*s held in suspension?

What we arrived at finally, somewhere in the azure fog, was a fountain-basin: a phosphorescent powder-blue bowl some nine or ten spans across, bubbling with denser violet fog like foamy suds.

A coldly boiling caldron. A chalice of flesh. A bathtub.

Of course all the "architecture" hereabouts had to be a purely temporary affair. This chalice, or bath of suds, had been laid on specially for me. I had no idea what the *Ka*-store might look like the rest of the time. Perhaps like nothing at all.

"You climb in," advised my friendly zombi. "You lie down."

The basin bore a certain resemblance, also, to an enormous sphincter muscle. "It won't close up on me, will it?"

"It won't *eat* you — never fear!"

Why do people say things like "never fear" when that's just what anyone in her right mind ought to be doing?

"Perhaps I could assist you with those things on your back?" Raf offered gallantly. "They look cumbrous to lie on."

"Ah, so comfort *does* come into this! That's nice to know."

With a certain amount of fumbling, Raf managed to detach the air bottles. He had no such luck with the locked belt and tail of rope.

So I climbed aboard that basin. As I did so, a sigh of satisfaction seemed to sough through the cavern. I lay down in the violet fog; at once I felt myself departing, into a different kind of place....

And I enter the *Ka*-store....

I'm Lalia, a woman of Gangee, thirty years old, dark and tall and strong.

I'm borne along within her life. A stick floating downstream, I go where the water wills; unlike a fish, which can turn and oppose the stream....

I'm a stowaway in her. I wear her like a glove. I see what she sees, feel what she feels, speak what she says, go where she walks. I regard Gangee not as a dingy hole but as home, a drumskin of familiar beats.

She, the Lalia who is experiencing her life unfold, remains unaware of me. Yet, a later, more complete Lalia seems to know me, and nod in recognition. My life as Lalia isn't continuous. I experience her in spurts, like a gashed artery from which her life-blood springs. Several days, then a skip forward....

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Men of Gangee are planning an expedition to cross the desert. By investing in supplies, the riverguild has bought me a place on this expedition as their observer. Maybe another river flows somewhere beyond the sands?

Why, this must be hundreds of years ago! Yet equally it's *now:* the urgent present moment, the moment that matters above all others.

That matters most ... and least. The present moment, the moment you're living through, is so often rushed away impatiently for the benefit of future moments. Or maybe you stand quite still and try to halt time, to savor the present moment to the full; but what you're really saying to yourself is: "Look! Concentrate! I'm here now at this point in space and time. I hereby fix this moment in memory forever — so that I'll understand and treasure the meaning of it ... in another hour, another week, another year. Not now; but *then.*" Only when a moment lapses and is gone can it be really known. Thus the moment is everything — and nothing, too.

Yet since I, Lalia, am living each present moment ordinarily, but also as part of my whole completed self, this treachery of time is healed now. Each instant becomes radiant and luminous. Every act and word is a dewdrop and a diamond.

This is the joy of the *Ka*-store; it could also be the horror, if the moment were evil and agonizing. But even horror is outshone, when the light emerging from each moment is so bright that pain is blinded.

We march inland from Gangee to the verge of the desert, accompanied by a gang of porters laden with supplies. We set up base camp in the dusty outback beside a tree-fringed pool, the last well. Beyond, there's only a plain of fine gravel horizoned by distant dunes.

We have planned well. Taking turns, we lead teams of porters far out into the Dry to lay down caches of food and waterskins filled from the pool. The first such sortie takes a couple of days, to go one day's march and return. The second sortie penetrates twice as far. And so on. In this way we scout a full week's journey into those far dunes, preparing the way, always returning to base. These preparations occupy several weeks and limber us up marvelously.

Then we dismiss all our porters and set out alone to cross the Dry. Six of us: five men, and myself.

Thanks to our preliminary forays, the first week's journey is easy — even though the ridge-dunes we have to cross are soft underfoot and complexly interlinked. We find all our caches without any fuss. Dunes may creep, but not that quickly; and only gentle breezes blow. It's the calmest time of year, the Lull. The river, of course, is breezier even during the Lull, but we're far away from it. We have six weeks before the winds blow strong again.

A sea of star-dunes succeeds the

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ridge-dunes; these we can thread our way through at speed. On scattered rocky outcrops, landmarks in the arid ocean, we stash food and drink for our return, further lightening our loads.

And I fall in love with one of the explorers, Josep. Likewise, he with me. But this is wrong. He's a man of my own hometown. We could have fallen in love only by being as far removed from the breath of the river. By being so isolated.

Isolated! Yet always we are in such close proximity to four other Gangee men (who mustn't guess, yet do) that we can do nothing at all about our love. This is both a torment and a blessing. We burn with frustration and yearning and dread, as surely as we burn in the heat by day. To me, Josep seems uniquely brave and beautiful.

Three weeks inland; and still no change in the dearth and death of the landscape. Only minerals grow here.

Impasse: the other four want to return while there's time. But Josep cannot bear to fail — though this is one of those enterprises where even to have attempted it is a sort of success. Josep wants to journey at least a fraction as far as *I* have traveled, on the river; but in his own direction. Only such a one could I love, who mirrors me.

After a parched conference, it's decided that three will stay here, camped in a jumble of crystal-crusted rocks in a shattered region of shale. Three will scout onward: Josep, me, and Hark.

A day later, Hark decides that we're marching to our deaths. And maybe we are. Maybe my bones will lie down locked with Josep's bones upon a bed of sand.

Hark and Josep quarrel; not violently but in a softly hateful way. Hark acts as though Josep is betraying the spirit of our expedition, by pressing on with it. Hark can't bear to be within the aura of our love, which grows fiercer the more it is prevented.

He leaves us early in the morning to retrace his steps to where we left the others. When he reaches them, they will stay two more days, then depart, taking all the food and water with them; that's the threat. The promise.

As soon as Hark was gone, Josep and I set out for the nowhere beyond nowhere. We have just one more day, one night.

How defiantly we spend that night! It seems as though the entire purpose of our expedition, all those weeks of preparation, all the porters and supplies, is simply for us to make love. Will we return and report, "Oh, yes, we discovered *something* — we found each other"?

Yet at sunrise, when we stir again in one another's arms, the suspicion dawns on me that Josep is making love not to a woman, but to the desert itself — to this naked emptiness far from the river where no codes of river life apply. My breasts are as star-dunes, my flanks a dune-slope under his sliding fingers. Between my thighs is the well of liquid we have not found. I'm the

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desert made flesh. Only thus can he master it; he who must master something.

That day we return in silence to the place where we parted from Hark. That night, when we unroll our blankets on the sand, Josep is impotent — because he is withdrawing from the desert now. Although he clutches me cruelly and forcingly, in a way I have never know a man act before, he achieves nothing. At last he turns aside in an agony of shame, so that I have to comfort him; and this is worse, for he weeps like a child.

In the morning when I wake, his tears are still falling on my face. It feels that way. Actually, stray raindrops are spitting down on my skin from a solitary cloud.

Off to the west, an impossibly dark mass of clouds bunches low, dispensing rain; dirty sheets of water drench down. Within an hour the clouds have fled, the sky is clear.

And when finally we reach the jumble and the shale, first we find one drowned corpse, then another, then a third. The freak flood has vanished; the desert is parched dry again. Waterskins have been washed away and ripped by shale, so that there's only a slop of liquid left in those we recover. We find a fourth corpse — Hark's, his skin already turning to leather.

"You brought the river here!" Josep screams at me insanely.

Thankfully, my life as Lalia jerks forward at this point, lurching toward its close....

A few days later, somewhere farther west amidst star-dunes, Josep falls down dying of thirst. As I am dying, too....

And for a moment I believe that a miracle has happened and that actually I *have* commanded the river and it has come to pour down my swollen throat and slake my terrible thirst!

But I'm dead; and the black current has received its daughter into it from afar. As I soon discover. I've come home — to myself at last; and it's this that illuminates all other earlier moments of my life....

I'm Charna, a teenager of Melonby, eager to join the riverguild in another year or two.

Right now it's the cruelest winter in memory. The river has frozen over. Boats are locked at their moorings, with ropes and spars crusted by frost just like the decorations on iced nameday cakes. No river traffic moves.

With my best friend, Pol, I venture onto the ice, skating and skidding, and scuffing up the dust of snow in lines and arcs. (It's so cold, the snow is dusty, not moist.) I carve my name upon the river for all to see.

Some of those who see are boys who begin to dare each other, for it seems as if the river has become as safe and solid as a road. They admire me; resent me. They're scared; and proud. In the bitter, calm cold they grow hotheaded, jeering and teasing, us and each other. Presently the boldest and

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most foolish of the boys steps onto the ice himself, and skids along beside us.

"You'll have to walk for a wife now!" warns Pol. "You've used up your one-go."

"Nonsense! I'm not on the river, I'm on ice — on top of it! I bet you could cross all the way to the other side!"

"Oh, no, you couldn't. The ice'll be thin in the middle. Maybe no ice at all."

"Whee!" He runs, and crouches into a skid. He tumbles and pratfalls all along the ice. Scrambling up, he slides back to the bank and hops ashore. "Come on, you lot!"

"No fear!"

"Not likely!"

"Chickens," he sneers, and jumps back to his ice-sport. Leaps on the ice a second time.

"Oh, I'm a riverboy," he sings. (Of course, the real song is about a river-*girl.)* "My boat is quite a toy! She brings me heaps of joy—!" (He's just making up the words, mocking them.)

Suddenly he screams: "Destroy! De-ssss-troy—!"

He windmills his arms wildly. He begins to race. Out, out....

We all watch, numbstruck. Soon he's hundreds, a thousand spans away. In his green coat he's a leaf blowing over the ice. Then he's no more than a sprig of grass. Finally, far away, he vanishes. The faintest twang sings through my feet. The ice has cracked, out there.

And a death has happened, because I wrote my name on the river.

I'll *not* feel guilty! Of this death I am innocent!

I'm a boatswain of Firelight, a happy and fiercely passionate woman. How can she be both at once? She is. I know; I'm she. She burns like the dancing jets of flaming gas in the caldera outside the town; yet inside she is sunned by her passions, not consumed or exploded....

I'm a multitude of lives, all linked, reflecting into one another. All those vistas and ventures I ever dreamed of as a little girl — and was robbed of so abruptly — just as suddenly are mine; to overflowing....

I am Nelliam, aged guildmistress....

Nelliam? Guildmistress from Gangee? But *how*—?

I'm in Verrino, residing with the quaymistress. I've been here for weeks, engaged in negotiations with the observers. Perhaps I'm not the best choice of intermediary, since I can't possibly climb that wretched Spire in person.... But I meet a young man on neutral ground, usually one of the many wine-arbors. He has coppery skin, lustrous eyes, and a pert little nose. If only I were forty years younger, and less sadly wise than I am now....

My own heart lurches — for the young man, of course, is Hasso, my

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erstwhile one-night lover, he who plucked the first flower from my flesh.

From another point of view, that of someone who can look back down many thousands of days of life, maybe I'm the best person for the job. But only maybe.

So I set my sails to the task, applying gentle persuasion, as though I'm out to seduce this young man; and only occasionally do I lose patience with him.

Much had been agreed in principle, and even put into practice; but now I want those panoramas of the west bank that the observers have been collecting and hoarding for a hundred years. I want these sent to Ajelobo, there to be engraved by craftsmen — and printed in a gazeteer that our own signalers can emend by pen.

All of Yaleen's information will be printed in this gazeteer as well. It will be a second *Book of the River*, a ghost guide to a world hitherto unknown. Or maybe I should describe it as a second Chapbook, since its distribution will be strictly limited. No additional, unofficial copies will sneak out; of that I can be sure. Those Ajelobo publishers depend on us to freight their wares.

Tonight is the night before New Year's Eve, and the wine arbor is lit by fairy candles. The arbor isn't heavily patronized this evening; most people are saving themselves up for the morrow. A couple of riverwomen natter together. A lone man broods. Two lovers — husband and wife of a few months' vintage, by the look of them — whisper in a nook.

Apart from these, only Hasso and I. Age wooing youth — except that Hasso is a little *too* experienced, suave, and cautious. Personally, I could do with an early night. No rest for the wicked, though.

"What guarantees can you offer?" he's asking.

"Our word of honor," I repeat. "Your panoramas will be perfectly safe. We just want to borrow them. We'll return them inside a year. It'll take as long as that."

Lights flicker softly around us. There should be music to serenade us. But no; music would lull me to sleep.

"O.K., *I* believe you. I'll consult...."

We agree to meet again in this same arbor on the night after New Year's Day; it should again be quiet, in the aftermath of all the parties and revels....

But come that night in the New Year, the arbor isn't quiet at all. It's packed and noisy. Because the head of the black current has passed Verrino. Now everyone is telling everyone else about it, offering explanations, contradicting each other. Instead of peace and privacy, there's pandemonium.

It's a clouded black night, as black as the current that has now abandoned us. All those fairy candles are just pretty twinklings lighting up the tiniest part of our fearful darkness. Crowds have sought sanctuary in this and the

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other arbors, away from the now-naked river.

And I know that I, Nelliam, am about to die.... Soon, and bloodily. I try to make myself stand up, to flee while there's time. But that isn't how it was; Nelliam's legs don't heed Yaleen.

Unsurprisingly, Hasso turns up late for our appointment. He chucks down two glasses of wine straight off before whispering to me what the observers saw of the worm's head through their telescopes. I can hardly make out his mumbling, with all the surrounding din. "Speak up, will you!"

He recoils, brows knit, offended.

"I'm sorry, Hasso, we're all on edge. Pardon my tetchiness."

"That's all right. I understand. So *then*...."

A sudden scream from the direction of the waterfront cuts across the babble. Momentarily the hubbub dies — then it rekindles, doubled. People leap up and crush into the alley.

"Wait here! I'll be back." And off goes Hasso, too.

Before long, bedlam is spreading this way. A murky red light leaps up above the rooftops. Somebody cries, "Fire!" Then a huge crash deafens me, and the fairy candles dip in unison to a hot breeze.

Hasso's soon back, out of breath. "Armed men. Must be the west! Come on: to the Spire!" He seizes my arm.

But I resist. "My dear boy, I couldn't climb that Spire to save my life."

"That's exactly what—! Nelliam, I'll help you. I'll carry you up."

"No, you must go on your own. I'd burden you; rob you of your chance. But promise me something. Promise that you'll be true, up there."

"True?"

"Observe! Stay aloof! Record whatever happens. Now *go*. Go! Or I'll get angry with you."

He dithers. Of course. But ruin and terror are racing closer every moment.

So then he leaves me. Though not before, absurdly, passionately, he kisses my wizened brow.

I refill my glass from the beaker. Such a shame to waste good wine. I sip, and I wait.

Though death, when it comes, is by no means as blithe and quick as I expected.

Nor yet so final, either....

At about this time I begin to detect something. For some reason my attention isn't being distracted by my sojourn in the *Ka*-store, so much as sharpened. Maybe that's because I have just been Nelliam, who is no one's fool. Maybe it's because the real significance of events shows clearly — luminously — through these lives, as never was during life itself.

From the corner of my mind's eye I catch a glimpse of what the Worm is doing with me while the "entertainments" are going on. It's using me as a kind of shuttle in a loom, to weave weft and warp together into a new de-

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sign, a different and superior pattern.

It occurs to me that this might make me instrumental in what *sort* of god it becomes. I might gain some kind of influence over it....

So, during my next slice of life, as a fisherwoman of Spanglestream, I do my best to ignore the pageant. This isn't easy. As soon ignore your own life while you're busy living it! The proprietor of the life I'm reliving suspects she's being snubbed. But then she cottons on (I think).

Time and again, I present a certain image of myself. I make this image the fiery center of my attention.

And this image is.... But wait; not yet.

One day while I'm out in the fishing smack hauling in nets heavy with hoke, a hand reaches into my life. The hand hangs in midair like a fillet of whitefish, fading off at the wrist....

When I grasped that hand, sky and stream and fishing smack all dissolved at once into a foamy violet fog.

I sat up in the luminous chalice. It was Raf, my blanched zombi, who held my hand.

He helped me up, though I didn't feel particularly weak. On the contrary: quite perky! Perching on the lip of the basin, I decided that the Worm must have nourished me well and kept my limbs toned up while I'd been resting in the bowl. Unless my period of dream-life had seemed far longer than it really was.

"How long did I spend in the *Ka*-store, Raf? Hours? Days? Weeks?"

He shrugged. "I've been away dreaming again."

"And is the current a god now?"

"I'm not sure. It's ... different. Maybe when a god's born, it's only a baby god to start with, and needs to grow up?"

That special image was still rooted in the heart of me. I concentrated intently on it.

"*Worm*," I thought, "*how goes the war?*"

Faint images flickered before my eyes; I couldn't make much sense of them.

"*Worm!*" I presented that special image to it.

With my inward ear I heard a groan of acquiescence. Victory! I *had* succeeded in printing that special pattern in the new fabric, in one corner at least.

I hopped down from the lip. "O.K.," I told Raf, "I'll be on my way." I hoisted the bottles.

"What do you want those for?"

"Mustn't leave litter! Especially not in a god!"

"Oh, it can absorb them. Dump them."

Yes, when its body thinned out again.... He was right. So I dropped the bottles, which would only get in the way. Let the guild dock my pay, if they dared.

Raf and I parted at Opal Island.

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The tunnel end of the cavern was still shrunken, but no more than before. The fronds kept out of my way.

I regained the dark exit. The helmet lay where I had abandoned it, but of the rope there was no sign; and the tunnel was pitch-black. I fiddled with the lamp to no effect, then cursed myself for a fool. The solution was simple.

"Worm: light up the tunnel!"

And presently the walls glowed faintly blue. Grudgingly; but enough to light my way. That I should be able to reach the mouth was a precondition of that special image I'd fed the Worm. Thirty paces along, I spotted the rope.

Maybe it had been jerked along when the Worm's jaws clamped shut. Or maybe the crew of the *Yaleen* had begun to haul it in.... I tugged the rope experimentally three times, but nothing happened. *Was the boat still waiting?* I laughed. Because it didn't matter; didn't matter in the slightest.

Before long I reached the end of the tunnel, where the rope led over a ledge and angled down a dark hole.

"Worm, light your throat!"

Light glowed faintly, and I rather wished it hadn't. Originally, I had rushed right through the Worm's gullet in darkness, arriving almost before I knew I'd left. Now that I could see what faced me, claustrophobia loomed. I would have to dive down the hole headfirst. Suppose I got stuck, would the Worm obligingly hiccup me out?

No point in brooding. Down I went. Fast, for the sides were slippery. I writhed round the bend, and hauled rope hand over hand.

Up. Up. Above me in the dim light I could see the rope sprouting from the lid of the tube like a taproot. I couldn't see any sign of a seam. Squirming tight up against the lid, I prized. In vain. And maybe when the lid did split open, the rope would run free and I would slide back down again.

An image appeared in my mind: of a trapdoor that opened only one way — and only when a weight bore down on it.

"Now you tell me!" I hung in despair, punching feebly overhead.

A second image blossomed: of the Worm's chin ducking underwater; its jaws cracking open while one corner of its mouth continued to clench the rope (in an askew grin, which seemed directed at me); then tons of river water pouring in.

If that was the only way....

I braced myself as best I could. Clutching the rope in both hands, I shut my eyes, held my breath. *"O.K., do it!"*

The tube tipped forward. Squelchings and gluggings offstage. A few preliminary drops dripped down my face, then suddenly a deluge drenched and battered me. I was nearly swept away.

Somehow, *somehow* I clawed hand over hand up through that waterfall.... And I was still underwater. Why, oh why hadn't I brought that bloody helmet? If I didn't get air soon, I was

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going to explode.

Dizzyingly, my world tilted upward. Higher and higher. I hung on for grim death as the river drained down past my eyes and nose. I spluttered. gulped air, blinked — and I could see a great wedge of daylight.

The throat had closed up tight again, leaving a shallow slop of water on the floor of the mouth. It was lucky for me no stingers were flapping about, but none had entered with the flood. (Maybe the Worm could control them?)

Lying hunched where I was in one corner of its jaws, I spied the river. Sky and clouds. A chunk of boat — with one welcoming saffron word: my name.

I jerked my head about a few times to knock the water out of my ears. I heard no familiar voices outside, but this hardly surprised me. Given the muting effect of our anchorage, any cries of alarm would have been quickly stifled.

"O.K., Worm. Open wide!"

As the jaw unglued, I staggered erect. I tore strands of drool out of my way and stepped forward to the lip. The rope, still dripping from its sudden dunking, sagged over a gap of water to the capstan. Since I'd stood here last, the boat had ridden back more than twenty spans, dragging its anchor, and half-turned.

The crew were all lined up, staring at me.

"Hi there!" I shouted. "What date is it?"

After goodness knows how many days of whispers, now at my shout a dam of pent-up noise broke open. Laudia, Delli, Sparki, and Sal began to babble questions; but Peli bellowed, "Shut up!" louder than any of them, and answered me.

Seven days had passed since I'd gone inside.

A week of war.

"Right," I called, "I'm going to stop the war! And here's how—"

I told them; and they gaped. But I think Peli and Sal believed me, at least.

"I'd like some food and drink sent over. Just in case I get peckish!"

"How about bedding?" shouted Peli.

Hardly. I'd slept in bushes, up trees, on mud and moss, on Spanglestream quayside, and most recently in a chalice of fog.

"No, but I could use a change of clothes and a towel — I'm drenched! And when you've sent everything over, unhitch this rope. Haul your anchor up. Sail the old *Yaleen* well clear!"

Because the boat was already well out of gangplank reach, some debate ensued as to the best method of supplying me; then a wooden laundry tub was dropped into the water, a canvas bag full of my requirements lowered into this, and a line tossed to me to pull the tub across. After emptying the

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tub, I cast it adrift.

"Hey!" cried Maranda indignantly.

Ignoring her, I stripped off — all but the bodice, which I had to tolerate. Fortunately, it was fairly water-resistant. I toweled myself as dry as I could and donned new boots, breeches, and a jacket.

"Oh, and you must signal downstream! Beach any 'jacks who are on the river!"

"Will do!" Peli unhitched the rope. I dragged it through the water and coiled it behind me in the mouth, leaving myself a loop to hang on to. Most of the rope was held tight in the gullet trap, of course. So now I had the Worm harnessed, after a fashion.

The crew had soon upped anchor, upped sails, and stood off. Sparki was already signaling downstream. I stood there in the mouth, my chest braced against the rope.

"*Worm!*" And I presented that special image to it.

I met unexpected resistance. An image of majesty. Puissance. "*But I'm a god,*" this seemed to say.

"*So blast me with lightning!*" I retorted. "*If you don't like it.*"

There actually *was* a mild rumble; though it came from deep within the Precipices. I guessed the Worm was readjusting itself internally, since this rumbling went on for a while. The noise was more like flatulence, a grumbling of the guts, than thunder. After a while, it stopped. That cavern where I'd been must have deflated by now.

Nothing else happened, but I stood firm, still insisting on that image. This Worm wasn't going to make a fool of me now! Actually, the Worm was already obeying; that was what the thunder meant.

"*Yaleen.*" Its voice came clearly in my head. "*I shall help, because you helped me.*"

"*Nonsense, you've no other choice. And anyway, it's your duty to help people, if you're a god.*"

"*Duty? Is it? My duty is ... to know what I am. To know what the other god-being is.*"

"*Why not leave well enough alone, Worm? Look after your women and your waterway.*"

"*The other god has eyes and ears here, girl! I need to gather the Kas of its servants.*"

"*You'll collect enough of those, as we clear up the mess you caused.*"

"*Afterward, we'll be quits? You and I?*" It was almost an appeal. The Worm was beginning to sound a bit more human. Less of that solemn "Worm of the World I am" business! Was that the secret of its change: that in becoming a god, it had become a bit more human at the same time? Less of a great big sponge for soaking up minds; more of a person in its own right? A person with a hint of me in it?

"*Well, I'm not one to bully a god; in the future I'll just ask politely.*"

"*Ask ... what?*"

"*Oh, of Kas and God-Minds and stars and worlds and Eeden.*"

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"I'll be sure to let you know; when I know, myself."

"Good. If that's all settled, let's move!" I waved a warning to the *Yaleen*, then jerked the rope.

Presently, the Worm's head surged out of the Precipice. Propelling itself, I guess, by sucking water into its underside, then jetting it out. Or maybe it used the energy it got from burning water. I glanced aside: old Nothing-Bothers-Me was really gaping. Peli was openly weeping with joy. Sal was cheering. I kissed my diamond ring to the two of them. This was the pattern, this the special image: myself riding downriver in the Worm's jaws.

As we swept past Port Barbra a couple of hours later, we weren't, of course, close enough to shore for me to spot any crowds lining the bank. Nor were any boats likely to sail out and maybe get in our way. However, I still stood grandly at the helm as though steering. Signals were flashing far off, and no doubt numerous spyglasses were trained on me. There are times when one should enjoy one's moments of glory, not shrug them off modestly.

Another four hours and it would be night. By then we ought to be between Jangali and Croakers' Bayou, and I might as well get some rest. (I wasn't *actually* steering the current.) By dawn we would be approaching Gangee, and getting near the war zone.

I had a choice to make. A decision before me.

For in my eagerness I'd neglected something fairly basic: namely, how I was going to disembark. Perhaps I ought to have hung on to that laundry tub, after all! First, the diving helmet, now the tub; I seemed to have developed a habit lately of throwing away things that I might need. If only I'd asked for a mirror, too! And not only to tidy myself. Come to think of it, I could probably use one of those bottles my friends sent over, to flash a signal....

My choice? It wasn't just a question of how I would disembark; though that little problem did rub home the nub of the matter. And the nub was this: I could halt the Worm at Umdala. I could wait for a boat to put out and take me off. Then I could dispatch the Worm's head onward into the wild ocean. By so doing I would have restored the current to the whole length of the river, and our world to itself. By and large. Give or take weeks of warfare to liberate Verrino.

But ought I?

I thought of how "conserver"-minded my own guild was at heart; yet how much freer and finer women's lives were as a consequence compared with life in the west. And on account of the fact that men hadn't been able to sail the river. Surely everyone's life in the east, man and woman, boy and girl, was better as a result?

But then I thought of the frustration and resentment the 'jacks would feel after they had tasted travel to dis-

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tant ports, and sacrificed lives in the process; unless they were all supremely glad to march home ... three hundred leagues on foot. (For they certainly couldn't sail the river, with the current back in place.)

I thought of the madness of Josep who had yearned to journey far, ony to see his dream first drowned, then parched to death. And I thought of that boy destroyed for a dare on the ice at Melonby. I thought of Kish caught in a spider web of domestic bliss in Jangali....

I thought of my own brother, destroyed by restless curiosity — because there was only one outlet for it. I thought of my parents, and Narya. I weighed and I balanced.

The Worm could come just *partway* out of its lair. It could stop near Aladalia, say — leaving a further hundred and eightly leagues of northern water free for men and women voyagers, both. True, that was only one quarter of the river's length. But it might be a start, a promise.... On the other hand, this would leave a long stretch of river-border open between east and west. The Westerners would be wise to assume we could close it if we wished. Though were they wise? And would they refrain from raiding and piracy? Would the towns from Aladalia to Umdala thank me for leaving their shores unprotected?

Ultimately, the wisdom or otherwise of stopping short did rather depend on what the Worm might learn of that distant power in Eeden that had sent us all here in the first place. It hung, too, on what the Worm might learn of itself (god or not). I didn't think the Worm quite knew what a god was; did anyone? Maybe a god was just an idea, waiting for an embodiment — like any other invention, such as the mysterious vessel that had brought our seeds here long ago. Which brought me back to the puzzle of the Big Intelligence, born of men that ruled in Eeden.

Basically, had I the right to decide to stop short? Had I won this right by restoring the current? Or had I only redeemed the mess I had provoked? In future years would I be seen as a heroine or a criminal idiot?

How could I know the answer to that, till it was far too late to choose a different option? And did this matter? Maybe no one can be a heroine if she sets out to be one. And if someone does set out to be one, *distrust* her.

Questions, questions. At least I had a choice. A free choice, for once. On behalf of everyone living and quite a few who were dead.

The bow wave rolled foaming away equally toward east and west. I laid down my harness rope and burrowed in the canvas bag, unpacking dried fish, sweetcakes, fruit, a bottle of water, a bottle of wine.

I drank some water, then scoffed a few cakes and chewed on a fish stick. The wine I would reserve to toast Jangali when we passed. A swig or several

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would help me get to sleep that night; to sleep upon my little problem.

By the time we reached Verrino next day, I would certainly have made my mind up. That's what choices are for. To savor them while you can, and then to seize one. Or the other.

* * *

So here ends *The Book of the River.*

My Book of the River, that's to say! The book that the riverguild asked me to write, here in Aladalia, even while the war was being fought and won a hundred leagues away. I guess they felt it necessary to explain to everyone from Umdala to Tambimatu exactly what had happened, even if this meant spilling secrets in the process (and perhaps bruising a few egos!). Otherwise, who knows what scare stories and wild rumors would have been flying about forevermore?

Before this book is printed down Ajelobo way, they'll probably change the title, though. And maybe some committee of guildmistresses will go through it first with a pot of black ink.... And then again, maybe not.

At first I imagined that writing a book might be as daunting a task as swimming the river or walking to Manhome South. But once begun, I found to my relief (then delight) that my story flowed easily enough. My reading of all those Ajelobo romances came in handy at long last! In fact, I can hardly bear to put down my pen.

What else?

Oh, yes: I have nut-brown hair and hazel eyes. I'm slim rather than skinny (except when on my way to Manhome South); and in bare feet I stand just over five spans tall, or short. I have a chocolate mole on the side of my neck. I forgot these little details. That proves I'm modest. Obviously. (Should I add them in? No....)

But of course there's *more;* which is what these last few private words are really about — for my eyes only.

This part doesn't belong in the book, but I'd better write it down in case I get struck by lightning or something.

For the Worm has kept its promise — just last night. (As if it had watched and waited till I'd finished my whole writing task.) Last night I dreamed I was out alone upon the river in a rowboat, when the grim head (which is actually loitering south of here) rose from the depths. Suddenly, I was wide awake in my dream, and in my head I heard these words:

"Yaleen, I was made, *aeons ago, to keep this world empty of mature minds. I was put here as a destroyer.*

"Recently I brushed against the God-Mind of Eeden, and it cried, 'Wretch! On six worlds since, I found your likeness. Habitable worlds, with no high life on them; and all in this same stellar direction. You aborted intelligence on them, you kept them ly-

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ing fallow. You injured my people when they came! What made you, *Demon? Name your master! War will go on between us till I own you and can use you, to find what made you lie in wait a million years, as a trap and barrier.'*

"But Yaleen, I think I've found how to enter Eeden. I believe I can send a suitable human agent along the psy-link. To fabled Eeden, Yaleen! And back again!"

Even in a dream I was able to figure this one out. And retort, *"Don't look at me! I* like *it here."*

"Come, come, Yaleen," chided the Worm. *"One fine day you'll die; then your* Ka *will be with me to send wherever I wish."* Its long white eyes winked, and its head sank back beneath the water.

Me, travel to Eeden along the psy-link? As an agent in a war of the gods?

In the words of some sensible lads of Melonby: *not likely!* And, *no fear!* I've some items of human business to attend to.

I *still* haven't seen my parents, to bring them up to date. Maybe I ought to wait till my book is printed and send

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them a copy first? But that would be churlish. We've been strangers too long. I still haven't bounced Narya on my knee; Narya my sister, not of the river but of flesh.

I'll certainly go to Verrino to begin with. Not merely because it's on the route to Pecawar — nor to gape at the damage or the prisoners, not to collect horror stories. I very much want to find out if Hasso is alive. I want him to know how much Nelliam appreciated his final kiss. And maybe repay him in kind.

I might stay in Verrino awhile, maybe help a bit with reconstruction. But then I'll head on home for sure: back to Pecawar.

Before leaving home again ... to go where?

I do fear that there's a big "where" waiting for me. And *that* may well be another tale, just as long as this *Book of the River* (new version, by Yaleen of Pecawar). If there is, it may be longer than the river itself — for maybe it will stretch all the way from here to the stars.

I can always hope I'm wrong.

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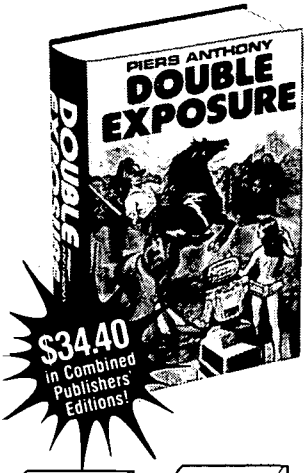

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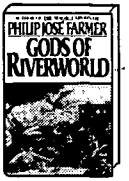

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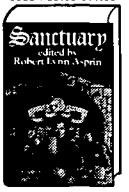

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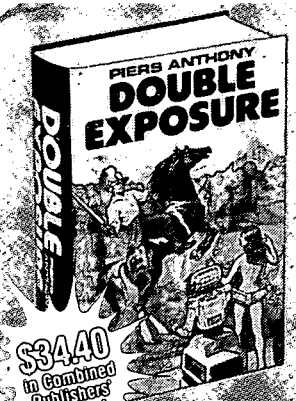

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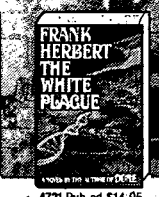

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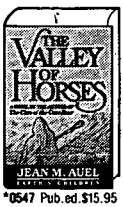

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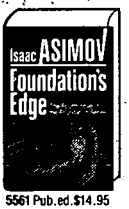

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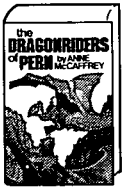

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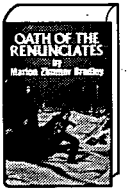

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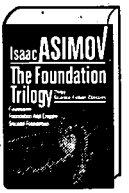

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